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Last seen bearing

Hyouka: Volume 6

From Baka-Tsuki

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1 - What's Missing from the Box

1.

I'm not the kind of person who clearly remembers things that have already come and gone. Even if someone were to tell me that something or other had definitely happened, say in elementary or middle school, all too often I could only stare blankly back at them, offering an unsure "Did it now?" in response. And yet, though there were also experiences I shared with others, I was occasionally the only one able to retain lucid memories of them later on. I had no way of knowing what it was that separated that which I would eventually forget and that which I would always remember.

Tracing through my memories—through the seemingly limitless gray of uncertain places and events—there were occasional moments of vivid recollection. These mostly chronicled events like sports festivals, daytime excursions, and school field trips through the woods, while others covered pointless events I didn't deem important, but, through the gradual weathering of time, still found themselves somehow cemented in a special spot in my memory. I couldn't help but feel a strange sense of admiration at their tenacity. On the other hand, I realized there were also times when I found myself clearly remembering a single tiny fragment of a completely normal day, one wholly indistinguishable from any other at the time. Unlike the detailed, magazine article-like memories that recorded events, they were extremely fragmented, void of anything orienting them. Even then, they were difficult to forget, memories akin to an old photograph you couldn't bear to throw away. For example, tirelessly watching the whirlpools born from clashing channel waters in summer, the robust imagination sprung on by rows of imposing volumes from unreachable library bookshelves in winter, competing for the last book at a store on the way home with your friend, only for the both of you to give it up in autumn... What exactly was it that separated these memories from the countless forgotten?

Then there were moments when I was suddenly struck by a certain feeling: “I might never forget this.” Won't I always remember that June night as well, under which I walked the city streets enveloped by a lukewarm breeze? Though, I guess I won't be able to confirm that feeling of mine until

ten, twenty years in the future.

It all began with a single phone call.

2.

I made yakisoba for dinner that evening.

It had been fairly clear out in the afternoon, but because the clouds gathered as the day set and seemingly prevented the heat from escaping back into the sky, the night air around me was humid and none the cooler, despite the absent sun. As everyone else in my family had their own pressing matters to attend to, I was alone in the house. Cooking sounded like it'd be a pain, so I peeked through the fridge in the hopes of finding leftovers or something else that didn't require effort to prepare and spotted some chilled noodles meant for yakisoba.

I found some shriveled lettuce, dried enoki mushrooms, and stale bacon, so I cut them up to shreds. I added oil to the pre-heated frying pan and threw in the noodles first, letting them sit there for the meantime. White steam started to billow upwards from the pan, and I became somewhat anxious as I hadn't added any water, but I managed to suppress that feeling in the end and waited a couple of minutes as it was being cooked, pulling the noodles apart every now and then. I then transferred them—crunchy, almost burnt—to a plate all at once and then started sautéing the other ingredients. When those were cooked as well, I moved them to the edge of the pan with long cooking chopsticks and poured Worcestershire sauce in the now empty space. As it started to simmer, its iconic fragrance wafted up from the pan and dyed the kitchen air around me with yakisoba tones. I finally added the sauce to the noodles and lightly tossed the mixture. With that was one order, ready to serve.

I carried the plate from the kitchen to the living room and then brought out a pair of chopsticks with a glass of barley tea to finish my preparations. On the table was some sort of postcard for my sister, reading "Class 3-I Reunion Notice." I don’t want to imagine what she'd say to me if I ended up accidentally getting sauce on it, so I moved the postcard to the letter rack, and finally, I was ready to dig in without any further distractions. I brought my hands together, and just as I picked up the chopsticks, the phone started to ring.

I looked up at the clock on the wall and it read exactly half past seven. The nerve of someone to call at a time meant so perfectly for dinner... To add to that, I was the only one home, so whoever they wanted to speak to was likely not even here in the first place. At first, I was just going to let it continue ringing as I picked up the steaming yakisoba noodles, but it ended up being so incessant and sincere that ignoring it any further caused a strange feeling of guilt to well up from within me. If I had to do it, do it quickly; I sighed and put my chopsticks back down. I stood up and picked up the receiver.

"Yes?"

"Hello, is Oreki-kun—"

I had assumed the call was going to be for my father or sister, but the voice from the other end wound up being one I was all too familiar with. Perhaps guessing from my voice and the atmosphere between us, the person calling suddenly switched from his polite tone to his usual one.

"Houtarou?"

"Yeah."

"Whew, what a relief. I didn't think you'd be the one to answer. I'd have no idea what to say if that sister of yours picked up the phone instead."

Although it might've been fortuitous for Satoshi Fukube, I couldn't say the same for me.

"Sorry, but for every second I talk with you, my yakisoba gets colder and colder."

"What?! Yakisoba you say?! What a tragedy!"

Yes, a tragedy, indeed.

"I'm glad you understand. Please get to the point, then."

I heard laughter in his voice. "You wouldn't have this problem if you just got a cellphone already. That's not what I wanted to talk about, though... I

was hoping you'd take a little walk with me. You free after this?"

As I wasn't really the type of person to party late into the night, I rarely left the house after dinner. It’s not like it wasn't unheard of, though. Thinking back on it... that's right. I had gone on an evening stroll with Satoshi once before. I glanced at the clock again. It'd probably take me fifteen minutes or so to finish the yakisoba, and some time after that to change.

"Yeah, I can leave at about eight."

"Okay. I'm glad to hear that. Should I come pick you up?"

I drew a map in my head of the distance between both of our houses. I'm sure he'd be willing to come all the way here considering he was the one who asked me in the first place, but I guess there was no reason to bully him like that. I thought up a location that was more or less an equal distance between our houses.

"Let's meet up at Akabashi Bridge."

"Sounds good. It'd be terrible to let your yakisoba get any cooler, so let's continue our conversation then. See ya."

The call promptly ended there without any lingering hesitation or closing remarks. He probably figured that any longer would only annoy me; that sensitivity was just like him.

When I returned to the table, the surface of the yakisoba had in fact cooled. With a simple one, two tosses of what previously seemed cold, however, heat began to rise from the dish once more.

Moonlight pierced down through the thin clouds in the sky, and a damp wind blew between the many houses around me. I had left the house wearing a wool shirt at first but immediately felt too hot despite the nighttime breeze, so I changed into a cotton one instead.

Although I couldn't fit my wallet into my chinos' pockets, the idea of carrying a bag with me sounded like a hassle. At the same time, however, I

couldn't really rely on Satoshi to cover me if we did end up needing to spend money and I didn't have any on me, so I took two thousand yen notes from my wallet and put them into my shirt's pocket. I stuck my thumbs into my pants pockets and left the house at the promised hour, but night fell early in Kamiyama City, and the narrow streets had already descended into soft silence.

Although I didn't really rush at all, I managed to arrive at our rendezvous point in less than ten minutes. As the name Akabashi literally meant "red bridge," it was exceedingly common, and in reality, the bridge we were meeting at wasn't even called that in the first place. It was called that, as you might imagine, because it was painted red, and its original name was forgotten all too easily. The area itself was often crowded in the afternoon because of the banks and the post office nearby, but I had no idea it became so empty after the sun set. I looked at the red bridge, illuminated by the street lights, but I saw no one there. *How strange*, I thought, *I thought he would've left first.* As I looked around, however, a hand suddenly touched my shoulder from behind.

"Evening..."

Although I'd be lying if I said I wasn't surprised, I wasn't that taken aback either. It's possible I sensed his surprise attack when I didn't see him at first. Without even turning around, I responded with a simple "Hey."

"What a let-down. Where's the love?"

Satoshi circled in front of me with a grin on his face, but it felt like there was something hidden behind his smile. His eyes didn't meet mine, but instead fixated on the bridge as he continued.

"Where should we go now?"

"I'll leave it up to you."

I didn't have much experience with these kinds of things, so I didn't know what was normal for a nighttime stroll. Satoshi turned his head and said, "It'll get a little more lively if we walk towards the city, but... I guess we can't go through the streets with all the bars. They're pretty scary."

"Probably, yeah, Mr. General Committee Vice President."

"There’s a family restaurant up ahead if we follow the bypass.. It's open 24 hours."

That was far, though. We wouldn't be able to get there without a car, or at least a bicycle. I guess Satoshi wasn't being serious, however, as he continued, "Well, let's just see where the wind takes us."

I didn't mind in the slightest.

Satoshi crossed Akabashi Bridge and started to follow a small path going upstream, along the city river. There was more water in it than usual, probably a result of the rainy season, and I could hear the gushing sounds of its strong currents. There were no streetlights in this part of the city, so I could only rely on the glow seeping from the faintly illuminated windows of the surrounding houses and the occasionally hidden moon to see my path. That said, my eyes eventually became fairly used to the darkness. Past a gnarled knothole in an aging wooden fence, past a curiously constructed sake bar with a traditional ball of interwoven cedar leaves functioning as a customer chime from the eaves, past the front of a rundown public bath with a "closed" sign lying on its side, we walked slowly through the city night.

Embankments had been constructed on both sides of the river, and they looked something like large stone walls. A good number of trees were planted in a row along the edge, and among them were some that curved out above the water's surface, almost as if they were flinging themselves out of the procession in the hopes of finding sunlight. I suddenly stopped and placed a hand on one of those roadside trees. Its surface was abundant with stiff bumps and protrusions, and its leaves resembled a shiso's in size. It was a cherry blossom tree. I bet this was a popular spot for cherry blossom viewing, and these well-kept streets almost certainly become lively in the flower blooming seasons. At this moment, however, only Satoshi and I walked along them, and these trees which have already discarded their blossoms wouldn't even be recognized for their true nature without a closer look. It seemed a bit sad, but what can you do? Time moves on.

I lifted my hand from the tree trunk and asked, "So, what's wrong?"

Satoshi hadn't called me out for a walk to simply enjoy the night, of course.

Sure, our friendship had gone on for some time, but it wasn't all that deep. We rarely ever made plans over the weekend, and when we went home together, it was usually only because we finished up at school at the same time. The fact that Satoshi had called me out like this almost certainly meant that he had something he needed to talk about, and not only that, it also meant that it was either too urgent to put off until tomorrow or too confidential to talk about around prying ears at school.

The Satoshi I knew often beat around the bush, but tonight, that wasn't the case.

"I'm in a difficult situation," he said as he started to walk once more.

"I don't want anything to do with trouble."

"Trouble, huh? At the very least, I can say with certainty that I'm in a troublesome spot, but the most troubling part of it for me is that you have absolutely nothing to do with my situation."

Unable to comprehend exactly what he was trying to say, I frowned slightly in response. He shrugged and continued.

"In other words, the trouble for me is that I need to ask you for your help, Houtarou, even though you have absolutely zero stake in it."

"I see. If I were to go along with your request—"

"—it would go against your motto, 'If you don't have to do it, you won't.'"

What Satoshi was saying was correct in principle, but I had already rushed to finish my yakisoba to join him in the city. Had I intended on turning him away without even listening to his story that had nothing to do with me, I would've probably been washing the sauce-covered frying pan right now at home instead.

"Well, you can tell me what's going on at least."

Satoshi nodded. "You're too good to me. You remember that the student council president election was held today, right?"

"Yeah..."

Although it had happened mere hours ago, I had already managed to forget. After school ended, we casted our votes for the next student council president as the term for the previous one, Muneyoshi Kugayama, came to a close.

At Kamiyama High School, this election period was set to last for a week. During that period, the candidates put up posters all throughout the school grounds, made the case for themselves during school-wide assemblies, and debated one another over the intercoms via the broadcasting club. All of that came to a close yesterday, and today was when we voted.

"Do you remember the candidates?"

I racked my mind for the answer to Satoshi's question. "There were two... no, three people I think."

He returned an almost sad smile.

"I was going for names, but to think you didn't even remember how many people there were. The correct answer is two, though I guess you'd have to pay attention to know that. Our school is bursting at the seams with strange clubs, but the student council doesn't really stand out in comparison."

"That's true. The candidates were both sophomores, too."

"You remember that, huh? It's only natural they were sophomores. The freshmen just got here in April, and the seniors are going to be busy taking tests now."

I guess hearing the reason did make it pretty obvious.

"It was a face-off between Haruto Obata from Class D and Seiichirou Tsunemitsu from Class E. You might think everything ended after the

voting, but I was actually one of the people tallying the votes."

I wasn't that interested in how the Kamiyama High School student council president election worked from behind the scenes, but his statement certainly piqued my curiosity. The jack-of-all-trades Satoshi Fukube is involved in a variety of clubs and groups, just for the hell of it. Specifically, he was a member of the Classics and Handicrafts Clubs and had been involved with the general committee ever since he was a freshman, now, even unceremoniously serving as its vice president. No matter how out of touch I was with the organizations in our school, even I remembered that there was an election administration committee as well.

"What happened with the election?" I asked.

Right as I did, Satoshi smiled. "Of course, it's the election administration committee that's responsible for the ballot boxes and vote counting. I was in charge of the oversight. Among the school rules governing school elections, there's a regulation stating that there has to be at least two students overseeing the vote counting process. The rules say that the only qualification needed to be met for this job is not being one of the candidates or in the election committee. So apparently, you used to be able to apply for it. Now, though, it's become a custom to delegate that job to the general committee president and vice president. I guess it *would* be a pain to have to search for people to do it every time."

Although he explained it so smoothly for me, it was precisely that lack of hesitation that made it so suspicious. This was Satoshi we were talking about, after all... As if picking up on my doubts, he quickly continued.

"I'm serious! I'm not lying. Not one bit!" he insisted repeatedly.

"Fine, fine. So?"

"There was a problem with the counting."

I see.

"At present, Kamiyama High School has 1,049 students, that is to say, 1,049 eligible voters."

When I first enrolled, there were 350 freshmen split among eight classes, so Satoshi's number seemed pretty reasonable in you counted all three grades.

He let out a forced sigh. "So, we totaled the votes... and we found out that there were 1,086 submissions."

"How…?"

It slipped from my mouth before I realized it. I'd understand it if there ended up being fewer votes than students. Some of them might've abstained, after all. But more? Satoshi nodded gravely.

"I have no idea. Taking into account the absent students, the ones that left early, and those who just didn't want to vote, I wouldn't really care if the total number of votes was any less, but if the number is more than the possible limit, you can't chalk it up to just a simple mistake."

He paused for a second and then continued.

"Someone did this out of spite."

I said nothing in return.

Just as Satoshi had said, judging solely by the information I had at the moment, I found it hard to believe this situation came about due to a simple error. Saying it was out of spite seemed like a bit of a reach, though, and it was probably more likely an impulsive prank or something like that. What did seem certain, however, was that somebody had somehow diluted the votes.

"In reality, the final tally showed that the difference in votes closely corresponded with the number of blank votes, and if the illegitimate ones were all blank, then that meant, of course, that the result wouldn't have changed anyways. The problem is that there isn't any wiggle room with this—if it was proven that something against the rules took place, the election administration committee would have to hold another election. I don't really care who put in the illegitimate votes... Though I can't even begin to comprehend the culprit's reason for doing this, I doubt I'll even be able to figure out who did it in the end. What I have to figure out is how he was even able to cast those votes in the first place."

"..."

"The most troubling part of this is that because the management of the official ballots was so half-assed, anyone could've created new ones. All you had to do, after all, was mark the paper with the official stamp, and you could find that lying around in the council room. But how did they manage to slip those ballots in with the rest? There's a hole somewhere in the Kamiyama High School student council president election process. As long as we continue to leave it unsealed, this kind of thing will continue to be possible, and conversely, even if future elections manage to go off without a hitch, we'll never be able to be certain that there wasn't an illegitimate vote submitted somewhere."

"Makes sense."

"I've thought about it a lot myself, but I hit a dead end no matter where I go. That's why, even though I didn't want to, I called you, Houtarou."

Satoshi broke off.

If that's was all he was going to say, then I pretty much got the gist of the situation. I scratched my head and looked up at the moon peeking through the clouds before dropping my gaze down to my feet.

"It looks like I should be getting back now," I said.

The small path continued straight along the river and passed by two bridges. We headed upstream, but how far did it continue like that? I suppose it was already too late to go on an adventure to find the source, though.

"You're going home..." he said, sounding as if he'd almost expected it, "I guess it was a bit too much to ask for, after all."

It wasn't that I thought he was asking for too much; the only problem was that he'd made a mistake. I'm sure he was fully aware of that himself but wanted to put it out there anyways.

"Well, sometimes telling others is all it takes to help yourself understand it better, so I don't mind listening at least. I'd appreciate it if you could leave that for tomorrow, though. I have dirty dishes waiting for me back home, and if I don't take care of them soon, the whole house will end up smelling like sauce."

"It might be a little too late for that."

He had a point. I should open all the windows the second I get home.

A light approached us from the front. It was a bicycle heading in the opposite direction. Until it passed us by, neither of us opened our mouths.

Satoshi finally broke the silence.

"Tomorrow won't work. I need an idea by tomorrow morning."

"Considering that you need to post the results by the end of the day at the latest, I guess I can understand. That should be the election committee's job, though."

A small sigh escaped my lips, and I continued.

"I knew you joined the handicrafts club and general committee for the kicks—something I personally can't understand for the life of me—but I was a little surprised when I heard you became the vice president. I thought you did the general committee activities partly for fun, so I never expected that you of all people would accept an official position. Did something change your mind?"

"Yeah... I guess you could say that."

"I see. I'm not sure if I should congratulate you or not, but that aside, just because you've taken on a role full of responsibilities like that doesn't mean I too want to get involved in any of its problems. Or are you telling me that it's my obligation as a student in our school to help maintain the soundness of our election system?"

He returned a conflicted smile.

"I'd never be able to say something totalitarian like that... Someone like me's much more suited to a bureaucracy."

"I'd say so. A nighttime stroll is certainly an interesting setting for a conversation with Satoshi Fukube, but if it's for a consultation with the general committee vice president, leave it for the committee room."

Satoshi didn't seem all too ruffled by my response, but replied with a hint of loneliness, not necessarily in jest.

"You sure don't mince your words, do you."

It's true that I may have been too harsh, but Satoshi had only himself to blame. If he refused to talk to me without a facade, then I had no choice but to reply in kind with my own—one of rejection of responsibility.

As I thus concluded my theory of the facade, I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye and started to speak.

"So? What are you hiding?"

"Hiding? What do you mean?

Putting aside Satoshi's story of the mysteriously increased votes, two things didn't add up. The first point was what I mentioned earlier: namely, why did he come to me for help? The second point, however, was even more fundamental.

"Don't play dumb. This whole thing should be the election committee's problem. Thinking about it... you should've had nothing to do with it in the first place, Mr. General Committee Vice President."

According to Satoshi's story, the general committee's president and vice president were responsible for nothing more than the simple oversight of the election. The illegitimate votes were certainly a major issue, but why was Satoshi the one trying to solve it? He had remained silent about this point.

To think that Satoshi, self-proclaimed natural denizen of bureaucracy,

would rise above his post and pure-heartedly try and unravel the problem plaguing the election system for the sake of justice... I refused to believe it. I suppose it was theoretically possible that he had intervened as a member of the general committee in order to get around the restrictions holding the election committee back, but I was just as ready to crumple that delusion up and throw it out with the rest of the burnable trash on collection day. Satoshi himself said that, since becoming a sophomore, he had changed, but I found it impossible to accept that it was a change that drastic and fundamental. That's why when he, someone who always joked around but never uttered even a word of complaint, called me out at night to ask for help, I knew there was more to the story.

"What i'm saying is that you're hiding the reason why you yourself want to solve the mystery."

Satoshi smiled faintly.

"I just can't win when it comes to you."

I smiled as well.

"I'm glad you've come to terms with it. You shouldn't even be surprised at this point."

"I guess so. I thought I could hide it from you, but so much for that."

Satoshi jumped out a couple steps in front of me as if dancing to some rhythm and then turned around to face me, walking backwards as he spoke.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you everything from the start, Houtarou, even though I came to you for help. I don't blame you for getting mad. It's not really something I needed to hide, but you know..."

Although I wanted to tell him I had no idea what he was talking about, we've already known each other for a long time now. As vexing as it was, I had the feeling I did.

"The administration committee president is—how can I put this lightly—not really the kind of person that others tend to feel fondly about," said Satoshi as he put his hands together behind his head. "He acts all high and mighty, considering he's on a high school committee, you know? I'm not really sure how to put this... He's the kind of guy that just isn't satisfied without telling someone to 'stop messing around,' even if they're working hard like always. His favorite phrases are: 'Don't go deciding everything for yourself' and 'Figure it out yourself;' I heard them five times already, just today."

I knew there were people like that, but this was the first time I've heard of one my age. If his descriptions were in fact accurate, I'd imagine he was worst case scenario for someone like Satoshi to deal with. He continued.

"Though, you were right, Houtarou. I didn't have anything to do with him."

"Which means... it looks like someone else was involved."

"Sharp as always."

Satoshi gave me a thumbs-up.

"It was a freshman member of the election administration committee, from Class E. I don't remember his name. I probably heard it at some point, but I don't remember. He was a really energetic kid, always saying 'Right away!' when someone asked him to do something. I don't think we would've gotten along, but I could tell he always did what he was supposed to... well... tried, at least. He was pretty short; looked like a middle school student."

"I can see where this is going."

"Can you? Well hear me out until the end, at least. For one reason or another—maybe he was really efficient or his class worked hard to finish quickly—he was the first person to make it to the vote tallying area in the council room. After he got there—and if you ask me it was the president's fault—he messed up the proper procedures."

Satoshi put his hands out in front of him and gestured as if holding an invisible box.

"You probably know this already, considering you voted as well, but in Kamiyama's elections, everyone casts their vote by placing their ballots into the designated ballot boxes. Those boxes are then taken to the council room and—and this is the important part—opened in front of the overseers. Mr. Class 1-E opened the box up before the overseers came and spread out the votes in the middle of the table."

I thought for a moment and then said, "I don't think it's that big a deal, though..."

"Me too. The overseers' sole job is to make sure that the boxes are completely empty, first before taking it to the classrooms to vote and then after taking out the votes, before the tallying begins. I did confirm that Mr. Class 1-E's box was, in fact, empty, so in reality, you could argue that we did actually follow protocol. But the election committee president insisted that there was no way to know for sure that he didn't dilute the votes while the overseers weren't present."

I see.

"Putting aside the mistake committed in the procedure, I have a really hard time believing that he was the culprit," I said.

"Everyone else felt the same way. Even I did. But apparently the election committee president didn't. Everything else went according to protocol, so there wasn't any chance for someone to mix in the illegitimate votes with the rest. That's why he decided that the fault couldn't have possibly lain with anyone else, and of course, verbally lashed out at the freshman."

Satoshi suddenly paused for a brief moment and then softly added one more thing.

"The freshman was crying, you know."

So that's what it was...

What it all boiled down to was: Satoshi wanted to prove there was another point at which it would've been possible to mix illegitimate votes in with the rest, even though no one had asked him to, all for the sake of some nameless underclassman who had been verbally abused far beyond the

justified amount for his minor mistake.

Completely taken aback, I could only offer this in response:
"I swear... you never change, do you? Always playing the hero in the shadows."

He smiled hesitantly back.

"Give me a break, I just got a little angry, is all. Besides, if you don't mind me making excuses, it wasn't like I felt it was absolutely necessary to rely on your insight. I thought it would've been simple enough for me to handle alone, but I was wrong. It turns out our elections are surprisingly foolproof."

"Didn't we have a similar conversation the last time we went on a nighttime walk like this?"

"Yeah... that was back in our last year of middle school, if I remember correctly. Man, that brings me back."

I stared at Satoshi Fukube. Overall he looked frail and somewhat unreliable, and yet, his expression alone was brimming with confidence—the same Satoshi I've always known.

He wasn't particularly kind or gentle, nor did he even have a strong sense of integrity. In my opinion, however, what he did have, even if it didn't show on his face, was a stronger than normal hatred of the unjust and unfair. Even for things I dismissed with a "Well, that's life," he would furrow his brow and do everything in his power to fix what was within his reach.

That aside, however, I guess I could understand where he was coming from. It wasn't that he was telling me to figure it out as part of some investigation to help return the general committee and Kamiyama elections to a state of normalcy, but rather, he was asking me to help him give the election committee president a good one for the sake of a crying freshman.

Part of me grew a little irritated wondering why he didn't tell me that at the start.

A gust of wind blew through the town.

3.

The path following the river ran up against the wooden fence surrounding a residential house and turned at sharp right angle. We continued to follow it and eventually arrived at a small three-way intersection. The road that stretched to the left and right had a traffic line running down the middle, unlike the one we'd been walking along up until that point, and the entire stretch was brightly illuminated by streetlights. I didn't normally come around this area, but if my memory served me right, if you went right and continued through the residential district, you'd find my old Kaburaya Middle School. If you went left and continued in that direction, you'd eventually reach the downtown area.

We stopped walking and Satoshi looked at me as if asking which way we should go. I was a little worried that someone might start asking questions if we ended up wandering all the way over to the downtown area, but part of me was hesitant to go near Kaburaya for some reason as well. It'd probably be a good idea to go left and then turn onto a different street before hitting the main area. I started to walk and Satoshi silently followed next to me.

"So," I said, restarting the conversation once more, "as far as you know, there were no possible opportunities for anyone to mix in the illegitimate ballots?"

Satoshi suddenly grinned and muttered a barely audible *"I really am sorry"* before exclaiming in his usual, unaffected voice, "That's right! I really have given it a lot of thought, but in the end, I can't find any real holes in the system, especially considering it's been the same for so long. If I had to say for certain... it's not that I don't consider it a possibility, but I get the feeling that chasing that line of thought will only lead to a dead end."

I wanted to ask him why he thought that in detail, but considering I didn't even know how the student council president election process worked in the first place, I probably wouldn't understand his reasoning. It'd probably be best to get him to explain everything from the start.

"From the beginning, please."

"Okay. Where's a good place..." Satoshi said, his arms crossed and head tilted deliberately in contemplation. "That sounds about right. To start with, it's important to remember that the ballot boxes have locks on them. Also, like I told you earlier, a third party has to confirm that the boxes are empty first before students cast their ballots and then again before the committee counts them."

"You can cast a ballot even while the box is locked, right?"

"Of course. It should've been locked when you voted as well."

I figured that was the case, but I just wanted to make sure.

"The election administration committee took the ballot boxes out of storage and brought them to the council room yesterday after school. The storage room was the one on the first floor of the special wing, so I'm sure you know which one I'm talking about. It also has mops, wax, and the like. Anyways, by yesterday, the paper ballots had already been bundled into a stack for each class with a rubber band holding them together. After school ended for the day, the entire election committee and the overseers gathered in the council room, and the member in charge of distributing everything handed the boxes and ballots to each classes' representatives. I'm sure you're already aware of this, but there are two election committee members—one boy and one girl—in each and every class. That meant that in the council room, there were two members times eight classes times three grades—forty-eight students—plus the two overseers for a total of fifty students, all packed in there like a can of sardines."

"Sounds cramped."

"Pretty much. After getting the ballot boxes, they had us confirm that each one was empty, and then the committee member in charge of the key locked them. After each box was locked, the members waited with them on standby. Once that had finished for all the boxes, the committee president gave the call for each of them to return to their classrooms."

I had seen the boxes and ballot slips, of course. The box was made of worn, amber-colored wood and looked sturdily put together at first glance. The

word "ballot box" was written in bold characters along the side. The paper ballots seemed to be cut from simple printer paper. The one I used earlier today didn't even have straight edges. I did remember there being the election administration committee's stamp, but I don't think there was anything like an identification number to tell it apart from the rest.

"You know what the election committee members did in the classrooms, right?" asked Satoshi.

"Yeah."

Once in the classrooms, the members placed their ballot box on the teacher's podium and wrote the candidates' names in chalk on the blackboard before handing out the paper ballots. As each of the students finished writing their choice—be it one of the candidates' names or nothing at all—they walked up to the front of the room and individually dropped their slip into the box. Each time this happened, the election committee members drew a tally mark on the paper in their hands to record the total number of votes.

I didn't really want to interrupt Satoshi's story, but I needed to ask him something just in case.

"Do the election administration committee members also have to take into account the number of absent students?"

Satoshi shook his head and said, "From what I've heard, they don't. Apparently, only the total student body count and the total number of votes are important."

I see. I guess some students not showing up to school wouldn't really impact their job, now that I think about it.

"The rules state that after thirty minutes, the members should cast their own votes and then take the ballot boxes back to the council room, but in reality, many of the classes finish much faster than that. After all, once everyone in the class has finished, there's nothing more they have to do, so they can pack up and leave. This part goes against the rules a bit, but there's nothing we can do about that considering it's pretty much a custom at this point."

I suppose if every ballot box was brought back to the council room at the same time, it'd slow down the process as well.

"As a result, the committee members trickle back into the room and check off their grade and class on a list to show who had returned. The person in charge of the key opens their box, and the member empties out its contents onto the table. There were several tables arranged into a cross shape, and we used that to tally the votes. We don't have to return them to storage until tomorrow, so there wasn't any rush. Once the overseers confirm that the box is indeed empty, they place them in the corner of the room. Once all the ballots from every class are on the table, they mix them around so that no one knows which one came from which class and then divide them among ten or so designated vote counters. The counters then place the votes into one of three trays—in this case, marked either "Haruto Obata," "Seiichirou Tsunemitsu," or "N/A." This part goes pretty quickly. The votes are clipped together in groups of twenty and then exchanged with another counter to confirm whether the counting was done correctly. Once both counters finish checking it, the overseers will verify it as well."

"It certainly is thorough."

"I know, right?"

I had no idea why he sounded so proud. We literally just finished talking about how he had nothing to do with the election administration committee.

"After doing that, we wrote down the total numbers on the whiteboard. From start to finish, the whole thing probably took about forty minutes. Just as we were about to record the victor, however, someone pointed out that the final numbers seemed off, and everything after that was pure chaos."

I thought I heard something like the low growl of an engine. All of a sudden, a sports car sped furiously past us on the small modest road. Satoshi glared at it as its tires screeched around the corner and then eventually let out a sigh.

"Everything I told you just now was exactly as it happened, but because there were so many people watching the ballots on the table at all times, I can't imagine it being possible to tamper with anything. That means that the

illegitimate votes weren't added during the tallying... And that means the only possibility I can imagine is that they were added to the ballot box from the very start, right?"

"It does look that way, but—"

"But what? I already told you this, but there are about forty-three to forty-four students in each class in Kamiyama High School. There were forty illegitimate votes. If the culprit had only focused on adding them to one box, that'd nearly double the amount it had compared to the other classes. We weren't really focused on the amount of votes that came out from the boxes, but I'm pretty sure everyone would notice if there were twice as much."

I agree. What if it wasn't twice as much, however?

Considering he had been thinking about it ever since school got out today, Satoshi had already considered the possibility.

"It'd be impossible for all of the illegitimate votes to be in one class's box. Then how about if it were split between two classes? We'd still probably notice. Three classes also seem a bit dubious. If they were divided among ten classes, then each class's total would go up by a measly four votes. That'd probably be unnoticeable."

"That might be true, but that then raises the question of how someone would be able to find the chance to slip illegitimate votes into ten ballot boxes."

"Yeah," Satoshi said as he nodded. He then added with a disinterested expression, "Though, honestly speaking, I'm pretty sure the culprit is in the election administration committee."

"I thought you wanted to help out that Class E freshman."

"I don't think it's him. It's just that I can't imagine it happening any other way. Only the election committee dealt with the boxes."

It's true that the committee members move the boxes around, so it'd be simple for them to secretly drop in some votes, but...

"So according to your theory, Satoshi, several election administration committee members colluded with one another to add the illegitimate votes by each putting in a little bit at a time? Sure it's not outside the realm of possibility, but do you really believe that's what happened?"

"That's why I said that line of thought led to a dead end. One or two members is one thing, but I find it impossible to imagine nine or ten being involved in this."

After saying that, Satoshi clapped his hands together and continued.

"So basically, I have no idea where to continue from here. There's no guarantee that someone used a trick to pull it off, but if we assume there is one, I have no other choice but to figure it out, to confirm the shadowy existence lurking within the election committee. If we assume there is no shadowy entity, then we have no further way of figuring out where and how the votes became so skewed. We have until tomorrow morning, but tonight, I want to start from the ground up and flesh this situation out into a proper whodunit. After all, because I had no one else to turn to, I ended up calling you, Houtarou."

4.

Red lights illuminated the night time city before us. Satoshi and I stopped walking at the same time, and we briefly lost track of our conversation as our eyes were held captive by the warm glow. It felt almost as if there were something foreign mixed in with the wind; maybe it was only a figment of my imagination. As he continued to stare at the lights, he suddenly started to speak, his head not moving an inch.

"You hungry?"

I wordlessly stared at the red paper lantern, "Ramen" written in black along its side.

It hadn't even crossed my mind that there might be a trap in a place like this, still so far away from the downtown. O' good children, run quickly on home into your beds now and dream sweet dreams for the night in Kamiyama City is dark and full of terrors.

"We shouldn't give in to evil."

"That's true... Evil things aren't good."

Three minutes later, the two of us were sitting shoulder to shoulder behind a narrow counter. The only things on the menu were regular chashu, and wonton ramen, as well as gyoza, rice, and beer. I ordered the regular ramen, saying, "I didn't really have a normal dinner," to justify it, and Satoshi asked for wonton ramen and a bowl of rice. The shopkeeper had a thick chest and a face the color of sandpaper, and there was a towel tied around his head. As we gave him our order, he responded in a booming voice seemingly coming from the pit of his stomach, "Comin' right up!"

Oil seemed to permeate all throughout the interior of the small shop, and the wallpaper, probably white originally, took on a yellow tint as well. It was only that way from age, however, and not from a lack of cleanliness. There had been another customer, but he passed by us on his way out, so the two of us were the only ones there. I took a sip of cold water from the

cup in front of me and suddenly let out a small exhale. I knew we had been walking around during a hot season in a hot place, but I didn't realize I was this thirsty.

"Have you been here before, Houtarou?" asked Satoshi, who had taken to fiddling around with a pepper shaker as he lacked anything else to do.

"No. You?"

"Nope. It's my first time here. I had no idea there was something like this all the way here. It's just that you walked into the shop so confidently... I was sure you were a regular."

"You were so quick when you said we should go in... I was sure you always came here."

Probably hearing our conversation, the owner responded with a bellowing voice, "Come on now. You two won't regret it."

As I zoned out, becoming faintly aware of the light buzzing sound from the ventilation fan attached to the counter, Satoshi started to grumble to himself.

"I don't really care about the culprit... but I wonder why he did it."

"Who knows."

"The student council president doesn't even really do anything in the first place. All he pretty much does is speak as the student representative at events. I'd understand if the culprit got angry at the election because he wanted a change in the school regulations somehow, but what does he think he gains from throwing a wrench in the process?

The only way to know that would probably be to ask the person himself. That said...

"If you’re fine with guesses, I have a couple," I said.

"Let's hear it."

"He loves elections, so he wanted to do it again."

"How intriguing."

"He hates elections, so he wanted to watch it burn."

"I see."

"He thought student autonomy was a farce and wanted to pose the question on the election's relevance to the student body."

"Terrorism, huh?"

"The candidate he backed wasn't done preparing, so he wanted to buy some time for him."

"The deadline for that had already passed, so that's a no."

"He didn't like the election administration committee president, so he ruined the election to watch him go pale."

Satoshi snickered. "The scary part is I can't really rule that out. At any rate, I guess we don't know his motives. The terrorism one has a certain charm to it, though."

"It could even be a love charm, too."

The owner took out a tied bundle of chashu from the fridge, surprisingly large considering the narrow size of the shop. He took out a kitchen knife and said, "Special service for the students." I guess he was planning on giving us extra. I couldn't wait.

I suddenly asked something that had been on my mind.

"You said there were forty-eight members in the election administration committee, right?"

Satoshi returned the pepper shaker to the rack, rested his cheek on his hand, and responded, "Yeah. Three grades with eight classes each, and two from

each of those classes."

"Yet, you also told me that only ten students did the counting."

Satoshi swiveled around on his bar seat to face me somewhat.

"Even with ten counters, that's only about 100 votes per person, so it's plenty possible. Besides, the counting process eats up a lot of space. If we had everyone do it, we'd need the gymnasium."

"How's it decided who does the counting?"

"Um..." He crossed his arms and mumbled. "Within the forty-eight members, half of those are the box carriers. They take the ballot boxes to the classrooms and come back with them when the voting's over. Their jobs end after they open the boxes and pour out the votes, so most of them go home when that's over."

"They didn't stay and watch?"

"Some of them did. The Class 1-E freshman was one of the members that stayed, but it's not like any of them are obligated to."

"You said there were also members in charge of the key and box distribution?"

"Two people take care of the box distribution. Like I said earlier, that includes the person who was in charge of distributing the paper ballots."

"Are the boxes already assigned to a specific grade and class from the start?"

"Nope, the boxes were each handed out to whoever was closest in line. The paper ballots were different, though. The students announced what grade and class they were in and then received their respective stack."

In Kamiyama High School, there were approximately forty-three to forty-four students in one class, though of course that number wasn't always consistent. Having too many or not enough ballots were both concerns, so they probably counted the total number of students in each class

beforehand. Naturally, there'd be too many voting slips as a result of the students who were absent or had left early, but that surplus itself had nothing to do with the problem of the illegitimate votes considering that the total number of votes exceeded the total student body count.

"Is it also the box distributor's job to make the ballots?"

Satoshi tilted his head in thought.

"All I did was oversee the process today, so I don't know. What I can say, though, is that there's no way any one person could make over a thousand ballots. I imagine that there were a number of people that split up the work. They cut the paper and marked it with the election committee president's stamp."

"That stamp's the problem. The illegitimate votes had it too."

"That's right. Just like I said at the start, it'd be simple to forge the ballots."

The only reason this whole debacle became about illegitimate votes in the first place was because they had the president's stamp on them. Had there been nothing on the votes that were mixed in, they'd be accepted simply as random, foreign objects. It was necessary to have made the illegitimate votes ahead of time, so if I think about the culprit in this vein, I might be able to come up with something.

—This was what Satoshi wanted to know. In order to restore the dignity of Class 1-E's John Doe, he didn't want to figure out the culprit's name; he wanted to figure out how the illegitimate votes were mixed in with the rest. Of course, it goes without saying that knowing who the perpetrator was would be ideal, but we had neither a list of names nor the manpower or authority to get one in the first place. The most rational way to go about this seemed to be not trying to do the impossible.

"What about the people in charge of the key?"

"There's only one key, so only one person. He closes all twenty-four locks before the elections and opens all twenty-four after it.

"Sounds like he has a lot of free time."

"He does. Maybe it's the perfect job for you, Houtarou."

I wonder about that. Those kinds of jobs make you wait on standby for an excessively long amount of time precisely because there's so little to do, and on top of that, there's a lot of responsibility involved as a result—sounds like a strange way to waste your energy. I'd want to tap out.

"So, within the forty-eight committee members, twenty-four are box carriers, two are box distributors, one is the key carrier, and ten are counters."

"Aside from those, there's the president, the two vice presidents, and the two members who write stuff on the whiteboards."

"So that leaves 6 people without responsibilities."

"Some people took care of various chores and the clean-up. I don't think they have anything to do with it."

Satoshi leaned up close to me.

"With this, we have a general idea of what all forty-eight people we in charge of. This might be a promising lead."

"Who knows. It might get us nowhere, but our conversation just now proved to be a huge help."

"Oh? Why is that?'

Before me sat a bowl of ramen exuding the sweet fragrance of soy sauce. The noodles were thin and wavy and the broth was the deep, dark color. There were two slices of chashu, two pieces of bamboo, and in the center of the bowl was a thick pile of green, freshly boiled spinach.

"One bowl of ramen!"

I took one of the disposable chopsticks and broke them apart with a clean snap. I gazed down upon the chopsticks, beautifully separated with a clean

edge, and responded.
"It helped shorten the wait."

"Go ahead and eat. Don't wait for me."

"Will do."

Thank you very much.

The shop owner wasn't lying when he said we wouldn't regret coming here. There wasn't anything special about it compared to other soy sauce-based ramen, and if anything, it was a bit salty, but it was precisely that aspect of it that made it so satisfying as to befit the dish. I had never seen spinach added as well, but all it took was one bite to make myself wonder why I hadn’t. In addition to that—and I couldn't decide if it was for better or worse—the soup was inexplicably and excessively hot. As Satoshi's wonton ramen came soon after, I exclaimed, "Ouch! That's hot."

"Damn, seriously!" agreed Satoshi in the form of a small cry as he brought the noodles to his lips. He wolfed down around half of it as if in a trance, and then stopped moving his chopsticks to glance furtively at me, looking like he was checking to see if I had slowed down..

"By the way, and this is unrelated, but—"

The noodles were delicious... I've never been this fully aware of the taste of ramen. I don't think it was even the taste itself. Maybe the texture?

"Are you listening?"

"Yeah"

"These wontons are amazing."

"Gimme one."

"Back off. But yeah, did you know? Apparently Chitanda was talking about running for student council president."

My chopsticks stopped for a moment and then resumed.

"News to me."

Satoshi blew on the wontons a couple times to cool them down and then swallowed them in a smooth gulp.

"I guess she was pretty popular back at Inji Middle School, and she's from an important family in Jinde, after all. Her grades are amazing, and she's really likable. Rumor has it that even the head instructor was seeing if she'd run. She made a name for herself during the string of culture festival incidents, and that was only magnified when the news of her participating in the Living Dolls Festival got out. All that's really missing is her club activity track record."

It's probably true that being the Classics Club president didn't do much for you in that department.

"I'm not saying I know everything about her—"

I picked up the hot tangle of noodles and held them over the bowl to cool them naturally.

"—but I don't think she's the kind of person capable of doing what a student council president needs to do, practically speaking."

"It was Mayaka who took the helm with the anthology, too. But that's no different. Some would say that if the president was well liked by others, that'd be enough; all you'd have to do is support them in doing those things."

Something like a decorative portable shrine, huh? It felt like him calling the student council president a purely symbolic entity was something of a joke, but considering we did have the domineering election committee president as an example, I couldn't exactly rule out what he said as being a possibility.

"Well, she ended up not running."

"Yep. Just like you said, Houtarou, apparently Chitanda didn't feel she was the right person for the job. That said, it looks like she was interested in if being the student council president came in handy after graduating."

"Came in handy... like for a recommendation?"

I heard that being a student council president made getting college recommendations simple. Though, I couldn't for the life of me understand why she'd be considering running for president with college entrance exams in mind.

Satoshi chuckled and waved his hands dismissively.

"I doubt it."

"Yeah."

"Apparently it was more along the lines of the experience representing Kamiyama High School helping her when she inherits her family's estate."

I ran out of noodles. I wanted to pick up the bowl and drink the broth, but it was still too hot. I absentmindedly gazed at the owner washing the dishes and the large pot of boiling water.

An heiress, huh? The world she lives in is so far removed from that of common sense. Even though I've come to bear witness to the circumstances that have enveloped her, even now, I can’t fully grasp it. When I try, I can't help but be astounded that something like that exists in this day and age. To Chitanda, however, that very word, "heiress," was her reality.

"Yeah..." muttered Satoshi with soft indifference as he slurped down the wonton ramen, "I wonder what I should be."

After a second failed attempt to pick up the bowl due to its combined weight and heat, I spotted some spoons next to the pepper shaker. I took one immediately and scooped up a mouthful.

"How about a lawyer?"

"A lawyer?"

Satoshi's voice burst out crazily as if someone had told him there was a mythical creature nearby.

"Haha, where the heck did that idea come from?"

The ramen in this shop has certainly piqued my interest. I'd have to try the wonton ramen next time if that's what it did to Satoshi. I had scooped up so much broth that it looked like it'd easily flow over the edge of the spoon, so I tilted it back and forth to empty it a little.

"'Cause you're a hero in the shadows."

"According to you..."

"A lawyer was just the first thing that came to mind. If not that... then how about a hitman? Striking down evildoers with a single blow under the veil of the night."

"Ha... ha..."

With a dry laugh, Satoshi returned to his wonton noodles. We had been eating at pretty much the same pace, but he still had his rice left. It looked like we'd be here a while longer.

A pair of flushed faced men in business suits walked into the shop that formerly only had the two of us. The owner called out, "Welcome!" Likely drunk, the men yelled in purposely obnoxious voices:

"Two bowls o' ramen!"

"An' two pints. Ya have any snacks?"

I felt like I heard Satoshi mumble something amidst the instantly lively shop interior.

"I hadn't considered that option... Interesting."

I wonder if I had inadvertently brought a hitman into this world.

5.

As we left the shop, the lukewarm breeze of a June night blew by, gently rocking the red paper lantern back and forth. Satoshi had tried to pay for my meal, calling it a consultation fee, but I shot down his attempt. A consultation fee... can you believe it?! The nerve of this guy sometimes. This part of him wasn't good in the slightest. It was a good thing I had the foresight to stash away a couple thousand yen notes before coming.

The loose change in my shirt pocket clinked delicately together with every movement I made. Satoshi looked all around him and then peered down at his watch.

"It's gotten pretty late. I guess we should head home soon. Sorry for calling you out at a time like this."

"I don't mind. I mean, all I have to do at home is wash all the dishes and the entire bathroom."

"You're mad, aren't you..."

"Not at all. If we're going back, could you walk me home? It's too scary to go alone."

This joke went over surprisingly well with him.

This last April, Satoshi found himself visiting my house due to an unexpected series of events. It wasn't like he made any more visits after that, so I imagine he wouldn't remember the exact streets to take in order to get there, but I'm sure he knew the approximate direction.

"Okay, let's go, then," he said, starting to walk before I did.

It looked like it'd be a pretty easy walk to my house from the ramen shop using the sidewalk along the wide road. The soft glow of the streetlights brought the vivid lights of winter to my mind and caused me to remember the ever encroaching summer. A small police car drove by along the traffic-less street, and although it gave me a small scare, it continued by without stopping to reprimand us for being out so late.

"I've been thinking," I started to say, "no matter how much I try to imagine when it was possible for someone to put in the illegitimate votes, I always find myself at a dead end. Due to the fact that the boxes were examined, I can't possibly imagine that the ballots were set there in advance. Besides, any box that had forty more ballots added to it would easily stand out from the rest and splitting that across ten ballot boxes would require a lot of help."

Although I was merely repeating what Satoshi had told me earlier, he nodded back in earnest.

"Exactly. I can't get any further than that."

"Then we have no choice but to change our approach."

From where did the votes that exceeded the total student body count come from?

At what point were they mixed in?

Suddenly, Satoshi blurted out, "I see."

"This is just a guess, but what if the ballots were on the table from the very beginning?"

"Really?"

That theory of mine was all it took to tragically deflate Satoshi's enthusiasm.

"No, that'd be impossible," he continued. "Of course, that's as long as if there weren't any unseen ballots on the publicly scrutinized table."

"I doubt there were any unseen ballots. What if there was an unseen committee member, however?"

Satoshi scrunched his eyes.

"You mind if I ask what the heck you're talking about?"

"Not at all."

The sidewalk crossed in the front of an abandoned gas station. The desolate appearance of the concrete structure's unoccupied vastness invited a strange feeling of unease.

"From what I've heard so far about the election process, there are two big flaws. If I took advantage of them, I'm pretty sure even I'd be able to mix in some illegitimate votes."

Although I assumed he was going to say something, Satoshi was dead silent. Maybe he was trying not to interrupt. Whatever the case, I continued.

"The first one was the checkpoint for the committee members who were bringing back their ballot boxes from the classrooms. After that was the confirmation by multiple people to make sure that the boxes were empty and that the ballots were bundled in exact groups of twenty. However, the verification for each returning member's 'grade and class' wasn't done in the same way. If what you said was correct, then that part of the process was done by the individual."

According to Satoshi, *the committee members trickle back into the room and check off their grade and class on a list to show who had already returned.*

"The paper they marked likely only listed the class names with a circle or cross or whatever next to them. Although it's the same election administration committee, I doubt they all remember each other's faces. Had even I, hypothetically speaking, gone to the council room with the Class 2-A box and checked off my class, I probably wouldn't attract much suspicion."

Satoshi's low mumbling voice seemed stuck in his throat.

"You might be right about that, Houtarou... Sure enough, no one confirmed that the person who left with a certain box was the same person who arrived with it."

"The ballots are the important part, however. Strictly speaking, it doesn't matter who carries the boxes; that has no bearing on the election. The class

list was also only for the express purpose of making sure that all of the boxes had returned."

"That's true," Satoshi nodded, deep in thought. "The ballots are the important part. This flaw that you pointed out is by no means minor, but it still doesn't answer the question behind when someone could have added the illegitimate votes."

"That's when the second flaw becomes important."

I tried to imagine what took place today after school, when, before the elections, the election committee members received their boxes—sturdily constructed boxes made of worn, amber-colored wood.

"You said that the boxes weren't assigned to any class in particular before handing them out."

"Yeah, I did."

Earlier, he had told me *they were each handed out to whoever was closest in line.*

"Is that a problem?" he continued.

"Distributing the boxes randomly isn't a problem in and of itself. The same thing goes for having the committee members check themselves in after returning to the council room. If you combine the two, however, what do you think would happen?"

Satoshi crossed his arms and stared up at the cloudy sky as he silently walked. He was about to collide with a telephone pole, so I tugged on his sleeve to move him out of the way.

"So what you're saying, Houtarou, is that one of the students who returned to the council room with a box might not have been an election committee member? I'm not so sure that has anything to do with the boxes being randomly distributed, though..."

"You're a little off. That's not what I meant to say."

It wasn't like I was trying to quiz Satoshi or anything, so there was no point in withholding the answer. The reason I repeated my question was so I could say everything properly in order without having it end up convoluted in my head.

"What I meant was: the election system wouldn't be able to account for the votes, *even if a student who wasn't an election committee member carried in a box that wasn't assigned to any classes.*"

After a moment of bewilderment, Satoshi's eyes grew wide.

"Unbelievable, Houtarou, that's not simple to pull off, you know?"

According to my understanding of the Kamiyama High School student council president elections as Satoshi had explained it, there were countless measures in place to prevent the mismanagement and incorrect counting of the ballots. If you assume, however, that a fake election committee member brought a fake ballot box, there were no countermeasures to stand in his way.

"Wait, hold on." Satoshi threw out his opened hand, palm facing me. "Isn't that a little strange? It's true that the election committee members don't have armbands or anything like that, so it'd be pretty easy to pose as one, but what would they do about a box? I don't know how long they've been in use, but I know for certain that they're old. They're not the kind of thing you could whip up overnight. If a student came in with some generic, old box, it'd be difficult not to notice."

He paused for a little and then continued.

"Moreover, it'd also be bad to assume that the culprit stealthily carried his ballot box into the room, added the illegitimate votes into the mix, and then left as if it didn't concern him. After they're completely emptied, the ballot boxes are collected and then piled up in the council room. It's impossible to get away with something like that unless you have a proper box."

"That's right. Essentially, as long as there was a box aside from the twenty-four used in this year's election—an amber-colored box with a lock and the words "ballot box" written along its side—it'd be possible."

"Where would you find a box like that?"

Where? Well...

"Probably in the storage room on the first floor of the special wing."

After all, that's where the ballot boxes were supposedly kept.

Wearing a visibly irritated expression, Satoshi stamped his feet on the ground with every step he took.

"That's where we had the boxes for this year's election—not your supposed ones."

I also grew irritated. Who's to say that there were only exactly twenty-four ballot boxes in the storage room? Why wasn't it getting through to him? As I thought this, it suddenly dawned on me. I see. It wasn't Satoshi's fault he didn't understand. These were family matters.

"A postcard came for my sister."

"Wha—" Satoshi stared at me, dumbfounded by the sudden change in conversation. "Oh, yeah. Uh, how's she been doing?"

"Good. Thanks for asking. She went back to college, so she's not home at the moment, and yet a postcard arrived at the house for her. What a hassle. I'm going to have to leave it in a place I remember until she gets back."

"Why don't you just forward it to her...?"
The shock convulsed throughout my entire body. Of course, it was all so simple. Why don't I just forward it to her? How did I not see it before?

"Houtarou?"

"Oh, sorry. I was just a bit surprised. Getting back to the subject at hand, that postcard was a notice about her class reunion."

Satoshi looked unsatisfied, as if wanting to ask how mentioning that was

getting back to the subject at hand.

"Um, listen..."

"It was for class 3-I."

A large RV, blasting energetic hip hop from its windows, drove past us. Satoshi opened up both of his hands in front of him and started to fold his fingers down one-by-one. A, B, C, D...

"So that's what it was. Nine classes..."

I nodded.

"Kamiyama High School having eight classes per grade is something that's only the case right now. Previously, it had nine classes, and possibly at some other point, it even had ten. It's possible that next year it'll have seven classes, and eventually six after that."

"I see. It was so obvious. The number of students... number of children is changing, but the school continues to exist as is."

We recognized ourselves as existing in Kamiyama High School. That wasn't incorrect, strictly speaking, but the thing was, however, the school continued to exist without a single regard for our existences. There was a point at which there were nine classes in a single grade, and that time had student council elections as well. Judging by the ballot box's worn state, it'd be safe to assume they've used those boxes all the way since then.

I can’t imagine they'd throw away the extra box. It was possible, after all, that Kamiyama would once again enter an age of nine classes per grade.

"In the storage room on the first floor of the special wing sleep the ballot boxes from an age when there more students than there are now. The culprit knew that, took one of the boxes, put the illegitimate votes in it, posed as an election committee member, and then carried it to the council room."

"He didn't write anything on the list of class names. Although the box should've been locked, and it had to have been opened by the key the election committee member was in charge of."

"There's only one key after all. It makes sense that all the boxes would be opened by the same one. Check the pile of ballot boxes in the council room first thing tomorrow, and if there are indeed twenty-five, that'll be your proof. There was no time to return it, after all."

If you were to realize that extra ballot boxes existed as a relic of Kamiyama's past, it wasn't all that difficult to see through the trick behind the illegitimate votes. Because I had an older sister who came from the same school, I was able to see Kamiyama High School as yet another thing in within the flow of time, however for Satoshi, who only had a younger sister, he was late to realize that fact. That's all there was to it, but even then, it left a bad taste in my mouth. Even though I thought I would've been already all too familiar with the passage of time, it was almost as if I were being told, "Maybe you don't truly understand the meaning behind it after all."

"I was too fixated on what was in the box... Something was missing," Satoshi muttered under his breath.

I shrugged in response to his strangely contemplative comment, and the movement caused the coins in my shirt pocket to clink delicately together.

6.

From what he told me later on, Satoshi informed the general committee president of the hypothesis we put together that same night, and the president told the election administration committee president in turn. It seemed that the election committee president was suspicious of the freshman from Class 1-E all the way to the bitter end, but because they did in fact count twenty-five boxes in the council room, by then, he stopped being so obstinate.

The hole in the system was sealed and the election held once again, resulting in Seiichirou Tsunemitsu stepping up to assume the position as the new student council vice president. In his acceptance speech, given over a schoolwide broadcast during lunch, there wasn't a single mention of that trouble that had previously transpired.

We don't know who casted the illegitimate votes. In the words of Satoshi himself, "Figuring that out is the election committee's job. I have nothing to do with it."

I was wholly in agreement.

2 - The Mirror Can't Reflect

1.

It all began on a Sunday.

I was out buying something that day. The tip of the G pencil I had been carefully using had finally reached its limit. I intended to stock up on carbon paper, and had also been stricken with a sudden, inexplicable desire to purchase a brand new compass. After visiting the general store I always went to, I made my way to the electronics store. I had started thinking about drawing on a computer, and so I decided to go and take a look at the prices. Even though my parents had an unused one at home, the computer's storage space was too small, making it unsuitable for art.

Though everyone said that the cost of computers was always dropping, my allowance was still too little for me to afford one. If I were to include a tablet to complete the set, there was no way that I could pay for all that. Fuku-chan might know of ways to make it cheaper, but even if the price was halved, I still couldn't afford it all. There went my hopes of advancing into the digital age -– as my ambition and I began to leave the store, a familiar face appeared in front of me.

"Well, if it isn't Ibara? Long time no see!"

Although they managed to recognise me straightaway, it took me a while longer to reciprocate the gesture. It was my middle school classmate, Ikehira. Because she had dyed her hair and was wearing make-up, I couldn't tell who she was at first.

In middle school, Ikehira had always made an effort to get along with everyone in class, and she hadn't been a flashy person. I felt that she had changed since then, and it wasn't due to the coloured hair or the make-up.

“Ah, long time no see.” I waved as I spoke. I wouldn’t call us close friends, but our relationship wasn’t sour by any means She was a normal friend I just happened to be classmates with in my third year of middle school. But, as expected, seeing her after such a long time made me nostalgic.

“What’re you doing?”

“I was thinking about buying a computer.”

“Woah~? Which kind?”

“They’re too expensive here, so I’ll probably decide next time.”

“Right? It’s all too expensive, huh!”

Ikehira gave an exaggerated reply before looking at my shopping bag.

“What did you buy then?”

“Um, it’s…”

The moment I was hit with this unforeseen question, I was at a loss for words. I’d kept my manga-drawing a secret from my middle school classmates. The only people who knew about it were Fuku-chan, Oreki, and a few good friends. It wasn’t a bad hobby, but if someone found out about it, more often than not, they’d ask, “can I take a look?’. That was just too embarrassing.

“Stationery.”

It wasn’t a lie.

Despite the dull reply, Ikehira nodded with an easygoing expression.

“Oh, of course. You were always a smart one, Ibara.”

If these words had been said back in middle school, they would have contained a lot of hidden feelings. When the jealousy towards good grades mixed with the inferiority of poor grades, there was bound to be an indescribable dejection.

However, Ikehira’s voice was light and indifferent. There was no need for me to be apprehensive anymore. Though I didn’t consider myself all that smart, my high school was more difficult to enter than Ikehira’s - being modest now would just invite contempt. It had already been over a year since middle school graduation, and yet, here we were, having a natural conversation. Perhaps we’d matured a bit since then.

There was still the issue of my shopping bag containing things that weren’t for school work, but instead, special ‘stationery’. I felt like I had lied, and was somewhat guilty as I asked,

“What did you buy, Ikehira?”

“Oh. Initially, I wanted to get a video camera, but the price is 1000 yen more than what I expected.”

“A video camera?”

“Yeah!” Her tone perked up. “I’m playing in a band now, you know? But, my technique sucks. So, I decided to record myself while practicing. I’m pretty hardworking, aren’t I?”

I laughed in response. If we were to talk about drawing manga, there were countless people who’d blithely say “I want to draw” and yet never put in time to practice. Compared to those people, Ikehira was indeed hardworking.

“What do you play?”

“Bass. But, our lead singer left us….”

As she said this, Ikehira’s expression suddenly brightened.

“That’s right! Ibara, you’re good at singing! Have you joined a club?”

How did this become the topic?!

I’m good at singing? Where had this misconception come from? The only reason I could think of was that I had been the conductor for the choir once. That was only because no one else had been willing to do it.

I hastily replied, “Yes, yes, I have. I’m so busy after school that I don’t even have time to rest at home. Also, I’ve never been good at singing.”

“Ah? Really? Is it a sports club?”

“Nope. It’s a literary club. You know some of the other members too.”

“Oh? Who?”

“There’s Fukube… and Oreki,” I said, mentioning their names casually.

As I spoke, Ikehira raised her eyebrows in shock. It was too late to regret it –

“Oreki? That guy’s there too?” Ikehira retorted with scorn.

Then, she seemed to misunderstand, because she spoke with worry in her voice, “So that’s how it is… Oreki’s around too. That’s just super unlucky.”

“Ah. Mm.”

Ikehira stepped closer, lowering her volume to speak softly. “Although I don’t know what club this is… if he gets too… you know… you should just kick him out. I can’t do anything to help you, but I’m sure there must be someone who’ll lend you a hand.”

Swallowing down the words in my throat, I could only give a silent nod.

-

After that, we exchanged a few more words before bidding each other farewell. On the way home, my thoughts couldn’t help but drift to Oreki.

Ikehira’s response wasn’t an overreaction. That year, the third years of Kaburaya Middle School had all had a reason for despising Oreki.

Or, to phrase it more accurately, the graduating students had all had a reason to despise him.

I hadn’t forgotten what had happened back then. But…

I could still feel Ikehira’s harsh, chilling response as I plodded along. That incident must have occurred right around graduation but, as I recalled, it hadn’t been in January or February. My memory was a little hazy, but it seemed to have happened at the end of November.

2.

There was a tradition in Kaburarya Middle School. Every year, the class of graduating students would have to create a graduation piece.

Because every cohort did something different, a lot of ideas had already been used over the last ten years. The seniors who had graduated last year had done ‘tree-planting’. One sapling was passed down through all the two hundred or so graduating students, transferred from one student to the next until it reached the last person, who then planted it in the soil. This was the ‘graduation piece’ from the entire year, which was honestly a shallow* effort.

I don’t know how we came to a decision on what to do. I suppose that the school’s office had been in charge of it since the project had involved an expenditure of money. After reflecting on what had happened in the previous year, and our graduating class resolved to make something that was more like a proper ‘graduation piece’.

“Our final decision is a big mirror. How does that sound?”

When the class chairperson, Sajima-san, announced this, frustration descended across the entire room. No one had ever thought about making a mirror, nor was there anyone who knew how to.

Sajima-san’s face always got red easily. At that moment, he must have been flushed as he explained, “I mean, we want to make a frame for a big mirror.”

Hearing that, we finally got the idea.

We would create a decorative wooden frame for a two meter tall mirror. Each class would be in charge of one portion of the wood carving. When it was done, the mirror and its decorative frame would be left in Kaburaya Middle School, to forever shine down upon our juniors.

If you were to ask me whether this idea was good or bad, I'd say it was a bad choice. Even though it was better than nothing, it was useless and it felt like after a few years, it would unfortunately become the subject of ghost stories.

With that decided, the first step of the actual project was for everyone to design it.

"Class 2's Takasu-san will be in charge of the design."

Once I heard this, I understood the reason behind the decision. Ami Takasu-san had won the silver prize in the city's art competition. She had also designed the mascot for the sports fair all by herself. She probably had the most expertise in drawing in our entire year.

Takasu-san's design was divided into ten parts, which were evenly distributed to each of the five classes. Each class would then be responsible for dividing the work and carving out their segment.

Once every part was pieced back together, it would be successfully completed.

This didn't seem to ask for too much time and effort. During that period, we also had to prepare for our high school entrance exams. Up until December, it felt like we were readying ourselves for battle. Everyone must have thought the same way – if the idea was too troublesome, we wouldn't be able to do it. No one voiced their disagreement, and so, we began working on our graduation project.

Takasu-san's design had an orthodox taste to it - trailing grape vines wound around the middle of the frame, stalks of vines and leaves covered everything, and fruits hung from the curve of a branch in rich clusters , creating a lush image. Some parts had been embellished with ladybugs and butterflies, while a few birds hovered at others.

Though I say all this, in actual fact, I had only seen the full design after the project had been finished. At the start, we only received wooden squares that were ten centimetres in length and the design of the section we were in charge of.

Our group had been allocated the design for the left side of the mirror. Sajima had told us that the mirror's top and bottom had very detailed designs, whereas the right and left portions were less so. Hence, we held a discussion and decided that the group who was in charge of a top or bottom part would carve out a single section, whereas the groups doing the right and left parts would have to work on two wooden pieces.

Of the two parts we were assigned, one depicted coiling vines and luscious, flourishing leaves. This was considered one of the easier sections. However, the other piece's design showed a bird pecking at the grapes growing on a vine.

The boys in the group had grumbled:

"Why're we the only ones carving a bird, huh?"

"Everyone else just needs to carve out vines. How are we gonna' do this?"

Even though these words were off-putting, they had a point. My group's design had been more demanding than any of the others. Their argument that the workload wasn't being distributed evenly was indeed true.

But–

"– No one said it was going to be fair, did they?"

This rebuttal was just as valid. I was usually the one who said these

things.

Once they heard this, the boys quieted down. When they realised that they didn't need to do the work themselves, they must have begun celebrating secretly in their hearts. The complex design, tight schedule, and looming exams – taking into account all these factors, leaving this job to the boys who had no experience with carving would be taking too big a risk.

Previously, Fuku-chan had said that what I valued the most was 'impartiality'. Because I didn't like to talk about myself, I had ignored his words back then. However, thinking about it now, it was obvious that Fuku-chan really did understand me.

But when faced with the unequal job allocation for the graduation project, the only thing I could do was to accept it.

Fortunately, I was considered quite adept at carving and Mishima, a girl from the Fine Arts club, was also in the group. Her specialty was actually in etching, but she was still more skilful than me at carving. The two wooden squares were a piece of cake to the both of us – though, admittedly, our studies did suffer a little during the process.

Mishima and I had never really chatted before that. Though I might be speaking out of turn, Mishima was the sort of person who kept herself guarded and closed off from others. Be that as it may, in the ten days we worked together to finish the graduation project, I felt that we had exchanged our share of secrets with one another. She learned of my dream to become a manga artist, at any rate. Mishima didn't tease me about it, nor did she tell me I could do it without a second thought. She just smiled and said "It'll be tough."

The bird had been carved by Mishima. At the time, I hadn't known what type of bird it was. I'd asked:

“Is it a swallow?”

“I think so.”

“Alright, then it is.”

We started referring to it as a swallow after this brief conversation. Thinking about it now though, it might have been a hummingbird.

For me at least, making that graduation piece was a good memory.

There had also been one minor dispute that wasn’t worth mentioning. During the final stages of our carving, one of the boys who had never come to lend a hand suddenly complained:

“You know, the talented people are the ones monopolizing this whole project. If this was meant for us to make memories, then there’s no point having the people with no skills participate.”

I remember that this was what he’d said.

Why hadn’t you said that earlier, then? You even chose to wait till the last moment to bring it up. I had a lot of things I wanted to say. Also, I used to be even more blunt than how I was now.

“Are you stupid?”

That was probably the only thing I’d said to him.

And so, we finished carving the two wooden pieces without a hitch. The portion that I had carved wasn’t as good as Mishima’s, but it was still rather identical to the original design. I was satisfied.

The other groups completed their own carvings one after another. The winding and curling grapevines, the single, large grape that took up

more than half of the space on the board, each and every piece gradually came together.

Finally, the day to submit the fruits of our labour had arrived.

The problem had happened on that day as well. … The group that had kept pushing back finishing their part of the frame had handed up something that caused everyone's jaw to drop.

That group had been responsible for the design of the bottom half of the mirror. In Takasu-san's design, the vines were meant to hang down abruptly and then curve back up a little. A horizontal tree branch was supposed to be placed where the vine had begun to hang down. Even though it would be difficult to make the dangling vine look natural, compared to our 'swallow', it was considered a much easier task.

Despite that, on the wooden board they had handed over, there was only one pencil-straight, horizontal vine. No, you couldn't even tell that it was supposed to be a vine. An extremely shabby-looking stick had been carved into the middle of the board.

This carving hadn't followed the design at all. It was a product of slacking off. As I recalled, when Sajima-san received it, his face reddened and his voice rang out with fury.

"What the hell is this? Why didn't you tell us you couldn't do it – why does it look completely different from the design?!"

On the other hand, the boy who had handed in the wooden board was unmoved.

"Because it was too troublesome to go up and down," he had said.

This had been Oreki's part in the graduation piece.

There was no time to redo the carving. The mirror's frame had to be completed before the mirror itself could be purchased. There was no helping it. Oreki's carving had to be included in the frame.

I had also helped to put the frame together. This had been done in the gym. We had to spread newspapers over the floor before starting our work. Once the newspapers had covered enough area, we placed all the pieces carved by each class on top of it. Because every board had a corresponding number assigned to it, we just had to follow the numbers and piece them all together.

Once every segment had been placed perfectly, we had to stick them together with adhesive. The adhesive was very strong, making it a little hazardous. Because of this, the task was left to the teacher. Wearing gloves and using a brush, the teacher bent over and glued the wooden boards together piece by piece. The students who had helped to sort the pieces out stood aside and quietly watched him. During the winter, the days were very short. I remembered that at the time, the sky had already turned black. It might have been snowing too.

At last, the teacher finished applying the adhesive. He slowly straightened his back and said,

"Alright. It's done."

As we weren't allowed to move around while the glue was still drying, we stood in our places and sized up the mirror frame left on the newspapers. Before then, I felt that we hadn't needed so many people to put everything together.

But, I thought that all the students that had been there in the gym must have felt a sense of achievement that went beyond words. I heard a few boys beside me talking about it.

"It's not that bad."

“Yeah.”

Honestly, for something made by a bunch of middle-schoolers, the mirror frame was pretty good.

In the finished product, the parts that Mishima and I had been in charge of stood out. It didn’t matter if this praise had come from me. I was completely contented with how it looked. Our part stood head and shoulders above all the segments surrounding it. It was exceptionally good.

However, there were also parts out of the ten wooden boards that hadn’t been done well. They had been crudely put together - some vines looked shoddy because they had been carved too thin, and at other sections, the leaves hadn’t been connected to the vines, making it seem as if the leaves were floating. However, there was no question that the “stick” Oreki had carved was the sloppiest.

Still, I could relax a little now. It was true that if someone were to try to connect all the curves of the art piece together, the only ugly aspect was Oreki’s straight vine. However, this small section wasn’t that big of a flaw when you saw the entire frame. Luckily, Oreki’s wooden board was on the lower part of the mirror, so it was quite inconspicuous, and the grapevines were all joined from left to right to begin with. As such, hopefully, nobody was going to say that “only Class 5 slacked off”.

Because it would take two or three days for the glue to dry, we had done all we could that day. Afterwards, when we had cleaned up the newspapers and were about to dismiss ourselves, Takasu-san came into the gym.

Even though I knew of the famous Takasu-san, we had never been in the same class and so I hadn’t been able to put a face to the name. Originally, in my imagination, Takasu-san had the slender figure of an

artist. I wouldn't have guessed that she had such a sharp and hardened face. I only realised that the girl was Takasu was I heard one of the helpers whisper, "Oh, it's Takasu-san."

She wasn't alone, but was accompanied by three girls who seemed to be her friends. She shouted at one of the helpers, asking:

"How is it? Is it done?"

Her tone was unbelievably flippant. I couldn't help but feel a wave of discomfort wash over me. I wasn't able to draw the connection between the dignified design of the grapevines that had grabbed everyone's attention, and her laughter. They seemed to have come from two separate people.

The group of four chattered and laughed as they approached the mirror frame.

I had thought that the finished product would make Takasu-san happy. Even if there were some less well done parts, no one could expect something that was made by the entire cohort to be perfect. And even though we didn't replicate Takasu-san's design down to a tee, I felt that the result was a compromise that suited the range of all our abilities. The rest of the students who had helped to put the frame together had all fallen into complete silence.

However, the moment Takasu-san saw the carving, the smile on her face instantly froze.

"Um…"

A chill ran down my spine when her expression changed. Watching her face darken, I learned what the phrase "losing all spirit" meant. Following that, she suddenly swayed on her feet.

Takasu-san raised her arm, pointing at one part of the carving.

“What… what happened here?!”

The section she was pointing at was Oreki’s half-assed work. Takasu-san’s bawling voice resounded through the gym.

“What happened? Why is it like that?! This is going too far! Don’t joke with me! It’s really too much!”

Seeing her become hysterical, the three girls immediately went over to comfort her. They kept saying things like “What’s the matter?” and “Calm down, okay?”.

However, in the end, Takasu-san cried. She covered her face, and the next instant was already choking out sobs. Having reached their wits’ end, the girls turned around and snapped at the helpers:

“What’s the meaning of this? Who did this?”

“This is her last memory of middle school! You all had better think of a solution!”

“Apologise! Apologise to Ami now!”

Even if she were to say that, the one who had carved that part wasn’t even around. No one was able to resolve the situation, and Takasu-san continued to wail out tears by herself. She didn’t even stop when the teacher tried to calm her down.

At last, the teacher looked at the group of people who had helped to piece the parts together and said:

“Which class was in charge of this section?”

Everyone apart from Takasu-san began to exchange looks with one another. In the midst of these circumstances, I had to muster my courage.

Now that I think about it, it had taken me less than ten seconds –

“Class 5.”

Once I reported the class in question, the three girls glared daggers at me.

They began spouting threatening things like, “I’ll beat you to death” or “Why don’t you just drop dead?”, only ceding when the teacher came to my rescue and said, “That wasn’t done by Ibara.”

During the graduation project, Class 5 had slacked off. This caused the designer, Ami Takasu, to burst into tears – This news had spread throughout the entire year by the second day. Class 5 had offered up the name of the perpetrator, and everyone came to know Oreki as the ‘villain’.

Several people in class condemned Oreki.

“You have to take responsibility.”

“Go and apologise now.”

“Class 5’s got a bad reputation now thanks to you.”

That guy completely ignored all of their words.

No one had defended Oreki. During breaks, Oreki was seldom in class. Because I was in the library society, I knew that he went to the library. He didn’t go to the library to borrow books, but to read his own – I had seen this happen multiple times.

In my opinion, what had happened couldn't be pinned solely on Oreki. He wasn't the only one in charge of that section. It had been done by his entire group, after all. In Class 5, every group consisted of six members, which meant that apart from Oreki, there were five others who had to bear an equal amount of responsibility for what happened with the graduation project. This was clearly the case, and yet, all that blame had been pushed onto Oreki. It wasn't fair. To be frank, whenever I saw even Oreki's groupmates chastising him, I felt incredibly sick.

However, I didn't think that Oreki was an innocent victim of all this. He'd definitely made some mistakes. I never even exchanged eye contact with him as he sat alone reading in the library.

The days of Oreki enduring the blame his classmates heaped on him didn't last for long. After the incident, Kaburaya Middle School entered winter break. After the end of the break, we began the third school term, and following that, no one could spare the effort to harp about the graduation project, because…

the high school entrance exams were right in front of us.

-

On the evening of the day I met Ikehira, I sat before the desk in my room and quietly thought about these past events.

Since I had entered high school, joined the Classic Literature club, and got on speaking terms with Oreki, I remained hung up about the graduation incident. Even though I had never thought that Oreki was the only one in the wrong, at that time, I thought that Oreki had disliked working because it was troublesome, and so he'd done his job with apathy. That made him an irresponsible person.

After that, many things happened.

The only reason I entered the Classics Club was to be closer to Fuku-chan. I didn't care about Oreki at all. However, after I saw him putting in the effort to resolve several incidents, I now felt that I didn't understand him as much as I had thought. Or, it was more like I had never tried to understand him to begin with.

He'd worked with us to solve the reason behind Chi-chan's grief.

And then, he went through the complicated process of helping a class of seniors. They had practically been strangers to us, and yet he'd helped them to complete their unfinished movie.

A number of similar instances like these occurred again and again. I was completely shocked to see Oreki participating in and solving all these problems. How could a measly guy like Oreki be so proactive? – those had been my thoughts at the time. However, what seemed the strangest to me was something else that had happened.

"… I remember it was around here…"

I mumbled to myself as I searched my bookcase. Keeping it tidy was the result of my vigilant care. It took me a brief moment to find what I was looking for.

A copy of 'Hyouka'. It was an odd anthology that had never even settled on what topic it would focus on. As a matter of fact, last year, I did all the editorial work for it myself. I had made an incredibly careless mistake when it came time to print the volumes. Afterwards, I had jammed this copy deep into my shelf without giving it a second glance, up until today.

There was no need to flip it open. I could still remember a large portion of its contents.

What I found strange was how meticulously Oreki had written his manuscript for this anthology.

Whenever something exciting happens, it's fairly easy to summon up energy and enthusiasm. An example would be giving your all during the sports festival, or attending the wedding of your relative. These were both typical scenarios. If someone heard, "Oh god, someone died in a locked room!" they would rush over to the scene, heart thumping. This was an incredibly normal reaction too.

Compared to that, writing an article was a vastly different experience. Under such circumstances, it was hard to be as energetic. Take Fuku-chan as an example, he had to use up a huge amount of strength before he could produce a manuscript for 'Hyouka'. Because I liked him, I sat him down in the clubroom and scolded him.

"I told you, Fuku-chan. I told you at the start. Did you listen carefully? Didn't I already tell you that just writing about 'something interesting' won't do? The problem is your idea. Of course it's important to be interesting, but it isn't just about being interesting. Listen, what you've written here isn't complete. Whether it's something interesting or something unimportant, you have to do your work properly. It's all because you didn't listen carefully that you're short on time now. You better reflect on what you've done. Have you reflected? You've must have reflected over it already. Alright, then I'll help you think. Sit over here!"

It had played out like that.

I wasn't saying that Fuku-chan was hopeless. It would be better to see this as a normal occurrence. Compared to 'Hyouka', the publication for the Manga Society was even more… no, I shouldn't think too much about that.

Back on topic, Oreki had an impatient look on his face as he said

“here”, and passed the manuscript for ‘Hyouka’ to me. At the time, I was still negotiating with the printer and hadn’t even set a date for the manuscripts to be submitted. My face had been expressionless but, underneath that, I felt incredibly surprised. The lines that he always recited to act cool – “What I have to do, I do the simple way” was it? – I had always assumed that they were the words of a lazy person. Only then did I realise that Oreki abided by his catchphrase. He wouldn’t avoid doing something he had to do. Probably.

Looking back at the time I spent in the Classics Club, which was also the year that I started to notice Oreki’s pitiful self, I started thinking about that incident once more.

The graduation project had been important to all the third years. Was Oreki the sort who would choose to slack off even during such significant event? Was he lazy to that extent?

I flipped over on my bed.

“Something’s off.”

I felt that something was missing. Back then, did he intend to do something? He must have had a plan. Only now, much later, did it hit me. What was that simple wooden carving hiding? It must have something to do with why Oreki had acted so indifferent.

Even though it had been so long ago, I wanted to find out what happened.

3.

On the first day of my small investigation, I managed to overcome an aggravating obstacle.

I reached the Geography Room right after class on Monday. Since it had to do with Oreki, I could just ask him straight up to reveal the whole truth. This was my initial plan.

Oreki was the only one in the clubroom. If this were any other day, I'd lament at my bad luck. But, today, it was instead a perfect opportunity. As usual, Oreki sat next to the third table, reading the book on his hand in that dull way of his. When I entered the room, he merely lifted his head to look for a moment before returning to his book. This happened usually too.

So, when I placed my bag down and approached Oreki, he didn't pay me any mind. What book was this guy even reading? I tilted my head to take a peek at the cover, and as if a gear had turned in motion, Oreki also tilted his book and hid its title. I righted myself, and Oreki followed by returning the book to its original position. Oreki wouldn't bring a questionable book to school, so what was he trying to hide? As I thought about this, my voice sharpened slightly:

"I have a question for you."

I made it sound like this was an interrogation.

"A question for me?" Oreki pointed at himself and ask, both puzzled and dazed. Even if this was Oreki, I had to admit that what I had said was wrong.

"Um. Sorry. I'm not going to criticise you. I just wanted to ask you something about the past."

“Something about the past…”

As he said this, Oreki placed his book on the table – not forgetting to hide its cover.

“If it’s about history, Satoshi knows more than me.”

I didn’t have the patience to play along in a double act. I pulled a chair up and sat right in front of Oreki.

“It’s about what happened during middle school.”

“Satoshi knows more about that too.”

“It’s about the graduation project.”

Oreki immediately met my eyes, a sternness crossing his face. Slowly, he said, “Doesn’t Satoshi know more about that than me?”

He was right. Fuku-chan had been part of the organising committee for the graduation project. Oreki bringing up Fuku-chan’s name was to be expected. However, it still felt like he was dodging me, or was I thinking too much?

I said to Oreki bluntly, “It’s about you. Don’t you dare say that Fuku-chan knows better again.”

“Alright, alright, hurry up and ask then.”

I balled my raised hand into a fist and put it on the table. “You haven’t forgotten, right? That large mirror, and the carving on the mirror frame. … You slacked off when you did it, didn’t you?”

“So that’s what this is about. Why are you asking about this out of nowhere?”

“I saw Ikehira yesterday. We talked about you.”

Saying this, I thought that it wasn’t below this guy to forget the name of his classmate. So, I added, “Ikehira was a girl in Class 3-5.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I wonder if that’s the truth.”

Oreki averted his eyes.

“It’s true. Average height, not fat or skinny… black eyes and hair.”

“Do you think I’m an idiot?”

Having heard this, Oreki creased his brow slightly. He rested a hand on his book.

“I was just getting to the good part.”

“Really? I’m sorry. We’ll talk later, then.”

“It’s fine.”

Oreki pushed the book aside before placing both his hands on the table. “I caused the class some trouble during that incident. Even though it’s already over, it’s not right to be so insensitive, so I’ll apologise again: I’m sorry.”

He lowered his head after speaking.

Seeing his agreeable attitude, I felt even more dispirited. I hadn’t imagined that he would employ such a gimmick on me. We’d known each other for so long, so it was an effortless thing for me to see through

his little trick. He'd lowered his head in an attempt to end the conversation - that much was clear to me.

"I didn't expect you to apologise. Okay, then I'll just ask - why did you do it?"

"Hm, why…"

Oreki paused for a moment.

"Every person is different, and not everyone is as talented as you."

"I already know you're incompetent. So, you're saying that you carved it like that because of your butterfingers?"

If he was going to say that, I was prepared to shout "Nonsense!" in reply. Oreki's abnormal carving wasn't due to poor workmanship, but because he was too lazy to properly examine the whole design.

"There was another reason, but I can't remember it now."

"You can't remember?"

"My head was filled with thoughts about exams. It was just something for graduation, even if I put in effort to do it, no one would notice, so it would've been alright if I just did it roughly… Even though I can't remember now, that was probably what I thought back then."

"Huh?"

I leaned forward to scrutinize Oreki as I said, "You mean that you slacked off because you were preparing for exams? There aren't any other reasons, right?"

I wasn't able to tell if he was lying or not. How disappointing.

However, I could still read something from the expression on his face. The impatient Oreki seemed to be faltering.

"…."

Oreki's expression shifted.

Anyone would feel nervous if they were being stared down by someone right in front of them. They could possibly feel discomfort, even.

Regardless of these reasons, just then, Oreki's face turned slightly red.

"Oreki."

"What?"

Although I'd called to him, I hadn't thought of what I wanted to say. Is your face red? Why is your face red? Are you angry?

Following that, I tried all manner of convention, I tried nudging him, but Oreki repeated himself, saying "I forgot" and "I can't remember now", never letting up.

In that case, I'd have to outflank him.

If I could just find out what had gone on back then, Oreki would be left with no way to escape and maybe then he'd spill his guts. But how was I going to manage that? That evening, I sat facing my writing desk at home and thought about it over and over again. Eventually, I decided that asking a classmate who had been in the same group as Oreki was the best solution.

I couldn't remember who had been in Oreki's group. Times like these called for the graduation album. Apart from class photos, the album also contained photos that Class 3-5 had taken together. I didn't know what

the other classes did, but in Class 5, each group had taken a photo together. I hadn't expected these photos to prove their use now.

I removed the album from the bookshelf, spread it open on the table, and flipped to Class 5's page. Though the cameraman had told us to smile, Oreki's face remained stoic. There were five other classmates with him. As long as one of them had gotten into Kamiyama High School, I'd have found my answer.

"Ah… Yes!"

Found them. I tapped their photo with my finger.

Kei Shibano. Although she was capricious, I remembered that she had been kind to those who were depressed. Her catchphrase was, "I have to lose weight". She had been slightly plump, but I felt that it wasn't to the point where she had to worry about it.

Naturally, I'd seen her often in Kamiyama High. We had the same gym period last year. This was great – Shibano was someone I found easy to talk to. I didn't know which class she was in, but that wasn't a big problem at all. I'd just have to wait until tomorrow. For the moment, I set the matter aside.

I rarely had a chance to take the album out. There was no reason not to look for Fuku-chan. And so, I flipped the page.

Once I found 'Satoshi Fukube' in his third year of middle school, I let out a pleased laugh.

"Hahaha! He's so tiny!"

Fuku-chan still looked like a girl even now. It was hard to tell that he was a second year high school student. However, it was easy to see from this photo that he had changed since then. It must have been the

same for me.

Right. Now that I'd had my eye candy*, it was time to study.

The next day, I found out which class Shibano was in. This was easier than I imagined. I got the information from two friends, and found out that she was in Class D. I learned of this at the end of the third period, but decided to wait until lunch break before searching for her.

I didn't have a bento with me for lunch. Actually, half the time I wasn't even hungry at noon. Fuku-chan had said that "It's because you ate too much in the morning". On one hand, this made sense. On the other hand, I kicked at his legs a few times. After that, I came to the quick decision of skipping lunch.

I reached Class D and found Shibano without much effort, but she was still eating. I loitered at the corridor for a while, until I thought the time was just about right, before entering Class 5. I had been a student for many years, but I still couldn't help but feel anxious whenever I entered another class.

"Hm? Ibara? It's rare to see you here. Are you looking for someone?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Who're you looking for? Do you need me to get them for you?"

"Actually, I wanted to ask you something. Do you have some time now?"

Shibano didn't find it odd. She cheerfully agreed, "Sure! Let's go over there to talk then."

Shibano and I stood next to the classroom's windows. Someone had opened the window and a cool wind swept into the room. I couldn't

help but feel that I had said these same words in middle school – this weird memory made my head itch.

“What’s up?”

“Last Sunday, I met Ikehira.”

“Oh, Ikehira? How nostalgic. I heard that she’s in a band now.”

I was a little surprised by this. “Even you know about it? It seems that she’s having a hard time finding a lead singer.”

“Hm?” Shibano lifted her brow. “So you’re going to sing for them, Ibara? Or are you helping her find a singer?”

It seemed that she wanted to help Ikehira, but dreaded the prospect of singing. I hastily waved a hand and said, “No, no. It’s not about that. We talked about the graduation project. You know, the carving for the mirror frame?”

“… Oh, I see.”

As if she had come to an understanding, Shibano shifted her eyes away.

“You’re talking about that even now? Yeah, I guess you would.”

How should I bring up the question? I had a few options. However, at the end, being straightforward was the best way to go about it. I didn’t like acting smart, wasting time fooling around and then asking “So, what happened back then?” What I disliked even more was guilting someone into answering a question. So, I said,

“I’m in the Classics Club now. Oreki’s there too. When I brought him up, Ikehira was completely put off. I guess it’s to be expected.”

“Ah, Oreki. Yeah, that’s true. Some people may still hold a grudge.”

“But I thought about it, and it feels weird somehow.”

Without knowing it, my voice was gradually rising. “Speaking of Oreki, doesn’t it feel like he’s always off in his own world, or that he doesn’t like doing work?”

“I didn’t talk to him much, but yeah, I guess he gives that sort of impression.”

“But I don’t think he’s the kind of person who’d purposely slack off. … Do you remember the thing that happened during the Sports Festival? Osada or someone said her stomach hurt, and it messed up the relay team?”

Shibano nodded her head, a weary expression crossing her face. “Of course I remember. I was the one who had to take her place.”

“Really? Osada always tried to help people without thinking things through. The same thing happened with the choir competition.”

Oh no, we were starting to reminisce about middle school. Lunch break was short, so I had to stop this topic and direct the conversation back on track.

“Let’s not talk about that first.”

I sighed softly and asked,

“What I don’t understand is - why was Oreki the only one who did the carving? That was the job of the whole group, right? But what I remember is that Oreki was the only one who came to hand in the piece. And he took all the blame for it. What happened, exactly?”

Oreki was incompetent at these kinds of tasks. I knew this without him having to bring it up. What I didn't understand was why Oreki was the one who did the carving for the wooden block. In my group, Mishima and I were the ones who did the carving. If Oreki had been in our group, he wouldn't even need to lift a carving knife.

This question hit a sore spot of Shibano's, and I had been anticipating it to be the case. She fell silent instantly, and her expression stiffened. I had no intention of blaming Shibano or the rest of the group, but the way I had put the question must have given her the wrong idea.

Even so, Shibano told me, "If you're talking about that, it was Oreki's own idea."

"… Huh?"

"He said he knew someone who could help out and finish it easily. After that, he took both the wooden board and the design with him. We believed him… though that sounds flimsy no matter how I say it. But after Oreki said that, we were happy to hand the responsibility over to him."

It wasn't that different from what had happened in my group. As soon as we said "The boys can't carve", they left us alone and made themselves scarce.

"So…"

There was a sigh.

If we had still been in middle school, Shibano wouldn't have let out such a heavy sigh.

"So, to tell you the truth, we probably owe Oreki an apology."

"… I see."

Though I was nodding, I wasn't telling Shibano that she should go apologise. I wondered if she got the right message? I wasn't able to tell from just looking at her expression.

During the winter of the year before, Oreki had handed in the graduation piece alone – that carving wasn't something a person could do by themselves. I had guessed correctly. He did have an agenda of some sort.

I had one more question.

"Who's this 'someone who could help' that Oreki mentioned?" Though I had asked this, I wasn't hoping for an answer. I didn't think that Shibano and Oreki had ever been close or even friendly with one another. I expected her to have no idea who it was.

Who was the third party in this mystery? Only one person came to mind. It could only be one of Oreki's male friends, and the only I knew of was Fuku-chan. … But, Oreki couldn't possibly have agreed to take on the job because of Fuku-chan's help.

As I thought about all this, Shibano seemed to be hesitating. I had been expecting her to answer "I don't know", but instead, I heard Shibano say this:

"Asami Toba."

"Who?"

"A girl called Asami Toba. That was the person Oreki was talking about."

It was the name of a stranger. It seemed to be someone I had never met

in my three years of middle school. Or maybe I had heard that name somewhere before?

“I think she was his girlfriend.”

Hm… I really had never heard of her before. Even though Kaburaya Middle School had less students than Kamimaya High, there had still been over two hundred students then. It wasn’t strange for there to be someone I didn’t know of.

At this point, I finally registered some of the words I just heard.

“Wait, what did you say?”

“His girlfriend.”

I don’t like talking about myself, but, at this point, please allow me to reflect deeply on why I reacted in such an embarrassing way. Upon hearing of the existence of what could only be termed as something fantastically absurd, I actually shouted “WHAT!!?” so loudly that it startled the entire class. I had never thought this possible.

All the students in Class D turned to stare at me. I quickly covered my mouth with one hand. Not good. I’d gone and disturbed other people. No, but, that couldn’t be possible. Were we still talking about Oreki?

Seeing that I was unable to recover from the shock, Shibano lowered her voice and said, “It was this one time. When I went to ask him if the graduation piece was done, he said, ‘It depends on Asami.’ So, I asked him, ‘By Asami, do you mean Asami Toba?’ And he was surprised when he heard this. He hadn’t expected me to know who Asami was. He thought that no one knew.”

“Mm, it’s just that, how do I put it… Your memory’s pretty good.”

This wasn't what I really wanted to say.

"I'd been surprised to hear Asami's name coming from him, and I got shocked again when I learned that Oreki had a girlfriend. But…"

Shibano gave a wry smile. "Not as surprised as you are now."

Following this, Shibano stepped away from me. This probably meant that she wanted to end the conversation. I glanced at the clock on the wall. Lunch was ending in five minutes.

"If you want to look for Asami, you can find her at the Photography Club. I haven't talked to her since we entered high school, but I saw some of her photos during the Kanya Fest."

Pausing here, Shibano mischievously added, "But if you want to know where Asami really is, Oreki should already know, shouldn't he?"

-

If I wanted to understand the reason behind the flaw in the graduation piece, Asami Toba would be a vital source of information.

Despite this, I didn't rush to the Photography Club after school. Instead, I raced towards the Geography Room, noticing how loud my footsteps were as I ascended the staircase. Damn you Oreki, just wait till you see what I'm going to do with you. Thoughts like "Even if I go to the clubroom, Oreki might not be there" and "What am I going to do with him?" filled one corner of my mind, but I shrugged them off as I reached the fourth level of the Specialised Subjects Block. I pulled the door of the Geography Room open with a loud whoosh.

Oreki was inside, sitting in his usual spot.

If he had been alone, I could've locked my hands around his neck and

strangled him violently. However, this wasn't the case. Sitting opposite Oreki was a smiling Chi-chan. Realising that I had entered the room, she raised her hand in a slight motion and said:

"Oh, Mayaka-san! What good timing! I was just listening to something very meaningful."

Don't talk about that first, Chi-chan, listen to me! That… That guy! He…!

I wasn't so far gone as to let those words escape. I took a very deep breath. Calm down, Mayaka Ibara. You haven't found any definite proof yet.

"Oh? What's it about?"

"An experience my sister had on vacation. I don't know whether to call it a heroic deed or something else… Let's just call it an illogical story," Oreki replied.

That typically gloomy mug of his managed to look sentimental as he said this.

As if Chi-chan had settled on a great idea, she placed both her hands on her chest and said,

"Oreki-san, you should tell Mayaka-san about it too. Start from the very beginning."

"From the beginning?" Oreki said in a pained tone.

But Chi-chan echoed with an enthusiastic voice, "Yes, from the very beginning. After all, only knowing the whole story makes it meaningful! And also…"

“Also what?”

“Actually, there are some parts of the story that I’m curious about.”

Oreki’s shoulders fell, defeated.

“How am I going to start from the beginning…”

“Please don’t skimp on the details just because it’s the second time.”

It was obvious that he had intended to omit some details. Oreki glared at Chi-chan with a certain kind of bitterness.

To see Chi-chan smiling again was a good thing. After all the things that had happened since we became second years, I had come to believe in this even more.

…. How could I possibly ask about Oreki’s ‘girlfriend’ in front of Chi-chan?

Also, it was highly likely that Shibano had made a mistake. If I had to illustrate how dim-witted Oreki was, I’d use this example – even if someone were to stand before him, point at themselves and say “I”, point at their chest and say “like”, and then point at Oreki and say “you”, he’d still need some time to think about what it could possibly mean. How was I supposed to believe that Oreki was secretly acting all lovey-dovey with someone?

4.

That night, I called Fuku-chan.

Oreki's story had been senselessly interesting. He talked on and on about this mishap and that, and yet, through it all, Fuku-chan had never dropped by the Geography Room. The last time I had seen him was Saturday. Good god, I hadn't seen him for three whole days!

I selected the name at the very top of my handphone's memory log. Before the phone even started ringing, I heard Fuku-chan's voice.

"Hiya."*

"Oh, you picked up fast."

I could hear a muffled chuckle on the other end of the line.

"I was holding up my handphone and preparing to call you, Mayaka. Just before I pressed the speed dial, your call came through."

"I see."

I hopped on my bed, bending over to lie down. "You know, I came across something odd today."

"Hm? What happened?"

I licked my lips and said, "Asami Toba. Do you know that name?"

There was a pause. I could picture Fuku-chan's puzzled expression on the other side of the phone.

"Yeah, I do. She's in the Photography Club, I think. The chairperson complained about her before. He said that for some reason, she refused

to participate in the student's competition no matter what."

"Fuku-chan, you even know the chairperson of the Photography Club?"

"Yeah I do…"

Fuku-chan knew someone that I didn't. It felt like my heart was being weighed down. How unpleasant. I sighed, chasing away these heavy emotions before asking,

"Listen. Toba-san might've graduated from Kaburaya Middle School."

"That seems to be the case."

"What do you know about her?"

Someone had said she was Oreki's girlfriend. If, on the miniscule off chance that this was true, Fuku-chan would show a little hesitation, wouldn't he?

Actually, there was a method to go about extracting information from Fuku-chan*. First, you had to test the waters with an unassuming topic, and then follow up with a natural progression of questions that dug in deeper. It was like a game.

Fuku-chan's reply took the usual, predictable route. I was the only one who could tell that his voice had become just a slight bit heavier.

"You could say I know a bit about her. Do you have a reason to look for Toba-san, Mayaka?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. You're pretty sharp."

"Of course I am. … But if that's the case, then you have to be a bit more careful."

Because Fuku-chan's tone had taken on a more serious edge, I sat up from the bed.

"Toba-san holds a grudge against all the Kaburaya Middle School students that were in the same year as her. If you want to have a friendly conversation with her, it's best not to bring up what happened during middle school."

Why? I wanted to ask.

But Fuku-chan prevented me from speaking. In a split second, his tone lightened up, "Well whatever. Forget about that. I have to tell you something. On Sunday, I…"

Because Fuku-chan was relentless, I had no opportunity to interject. At the start, I was reluctant to leave my question unanswered, but I was quick to give in after that.

We didn't have much time on the phone. Even someone like me wished to talk to Fuku-chan about happier things.

-

I had been in Kamiyama High for over a year, but I was still surprised to learn that there was a darkroom in the school. This darkroom was situated next to the Chemistry Prep Room, and so the prep room was also the Photography Club's clubroom.

After talking to Fuku-chan on the phone last night, I confirmed what Asami Toba looked like using the graduation album. Apart from her spectacles, there wasn't anything notable about her. If I had to say one thing about her, it'd be that she seemed be a little skinny. However, I was only looking at one instance of Toba-san's appearance. When I compared this photo to the group photo in the album, I noticed that she

seemed a little off… In the picture, she didn't seem to be smiling at all.

Still, it was handy to know what she looked like. Once I arrived at the Chemistry Prep Room after school, I could see that Asami Toba wasn't around. There was someone else in the clubroom, a boy whose hair looked naturally curly. I could tell from the badge pinned to his collar that he was a third year senior. I informed him that I wanted to speak with Asami Toba.

"Oh, Toba-san?"

He paused, scratched his head, and asked, "Is it urgent?"

It wasn't something I could consider urgent. No matter what the story behind Oreki's graduation piece was, it had happened nearly two years ago. Even though I wanted to know the reasons behind everything, and as soon as possible, I wasn't in a rush to uncover it within these two days.

"It's not. If it's inconvenient, I'll come back another time."

I assumed that Toba-san was in the darkroom, but the third year lowered his voice and grumbled, "Urgh, whatever". Then, regaining full composure, he told me, "If it's her, she'll be on the roof now."

"The roof?"

With this question, I sounded like a parrot learning how to repeat words.

I had been unaware about the existence of the darkroom until today, but I knew that there was no staircase in school that led up to the roof. After all, the clubroom of the Classics Club was on the top floor. To access the rooftop, you'd have to climb up from the metal ladder on the wall. The top of the ladder was barred by a bulky metal door. Though I'd never tried going up there before, I was sure that the door was locked.

“Yup, the rooftop. Don’t tell anyone else, but she has the reserve keys to the roof.”

Had the keys been passed down in the Photography Club, or did they belong to Asami Toba herself? Despite my suspicion, the answer to this didn’t concern me at all. After I said my thanks, I left the Prep Room and climbed up the already familiar Specialised Subjects Block. I wasn’t in a hurry to see Toba-san, but I wouldn’t get many chances to go onto the roof. Call me silly for being interested in a high place like the roof, but I still wanted to go up and take a look.*

When I reached the fourth floor, I realised that the door of the Geography Room was locked. Was no one around? Oreki had been present the last two days, so maybe he wasn’t around today. Also, it was about time Fuku-chan showed his face here. I’d go over and check later.

I stopped at the very top of the staircase. A ladder had been set against the white-coloured wall there. Though I’d always known it was here, I had never thought about climbing it. Raising my head, I noticed that the metal door at the top of the ladder was opened slightly. Someone was on the roof.

“…. Alright.”

I curled my fingers lightly, gathering my spirit before grabbing onto the ladder.

Even though there was no written rule that forbade us from coming up here, it was easy to assume that students probably weren’t welcomed on the roof. On another note, though I’d never paid any particular attention to it, I remembered that there were no safety rails on Kamiyama High School’s rooftop. If a teacher caught a student up here, they’d be brutally reprimanded, and the Photography Club’s key might even be confiscated. Thinking about all this, I climbed up the ladder even faster.

As expected, climbing up a vertical ladder required shoulder muscles, and the thin horizontal bars pressed against my palm. The person who'd gone up before me had left no traces of heat on the ladder. With every step, I felt the temperature in my hands being sapped away. It was hardly enjoyable.

I didn't make a sound, but as I climbed, I chanted "heave ho, heave ho" in my heart. Despite everything, the ladder itself wasn't even ten rungs tall. Though it required a lot of energy, it hadn't taken very long to reach the top. I pushed up a little, and the metal door to the roof opened easily. I'd thought that there would be some resistance, so this was a relief.

I emerged on the rooftop.

No one had cleaned the place, and so the roof was checkered with black stains everywhere. In front of me, there was a girl with a tripod stand. However, she wasn't looking into the camera's viewfinder, nor was she moving to adjust the camera – the girl was just standing there.

"… Toba-san?"

Because the metal door hadn't made any noise, the girl hadn't noticed my presence. I watched as she turned slowly to look over her shoulder, staring right at me with coal black eyes.

"Who are you?"

At that moment, I learned how three words could be intense enough to repel a person.

-

Without a doubt, she was Asami Toba. That face was just like the one in

the graduation album.

Still, I couldn't help but ask myself: is she really Asami Toba? In the album, she could have been described as: 'lacking a personality'. The kind of person that you would forget even though you'd come across her in the hallway – that was what I thought as I saw the girl buried in the album's photos.

But the person standing on the rooftop wasn't the same now. There was a barrier around her whole figure that seemed to repel unwanted people – that referred to me. She wasn't 'lacking a personality' any longer. I could imagine her invading my dreams now. Only later on did I realise that she wasn't wearing glasses.

I regretted being so optimistic as I entered her space. It was already too late. From the pit of my stomach, I summoned some composure and plucked up my courage.

Then, I spoke. "I'm Mayaka Ibara from Class 2C. You must be Asami Toba-san, right?"

Being addressed by her name, she carefully slid her gaze away.

"The chairperson was the one who told you."

"I don't know if he's the chairperson, but the one who told me about this place was a boy with curly hair."

"That guy…" She muttered angrily.

"… So, since you know who I am, what do you want?"

"Mm."

Talking under the open sky, the distance between Toba-san and me

seemed to increase. So, I stepped closer to her.

“I wanted to ask you about something. Is now good?”

A sarcastic smile appeared at the corner of her lips. “You’ve already found this place. Is there really a need to ask that?”

That was true.

“It doesn’t matter. What do you want to ask?”

I remembered Fuku-chan’s warning – it was better not to talk about middle school. But there was no other choice:

“About the graduation project.”

“… What are you referring to?”

“The graduation piece for Kaburaya Middle School. It’s about the frame for that large mirror.”

I could see that her whole body had frozen in place. Upon hearing the words, “graduation piece”, Toba-san had an obvious reaction. I wasn’t able to read into her expression, but I could tell that the wariness in Toba-san’s eyes had grown stronger. I’d have to play all the cards in my hand before she could turn me away. Increasing the volume of my voice, I said,

“I’m not sure if Toba-san knows or not, but during the graduation project, one boy managed to get a lot of people to hate him, all by himself – it was Houtarou Oreki from Class 5. Because of the lazy, poorly-done carving he handed in, Takasu-san, the one in charge of the design had cried and cried.

But I’ve always thought that something was up. Oreki’s lazy, but even

he wouldn't want to spoil the graduation project of the entire year, the thing we made to help preserve our memories – he's not self-centred to that extent. So, I thought that maybe he was trying to hide something behind his back. After I investigated, your name came up, Toba-san. Oreki, Toba-san, and the graduaton piece – what is the connection between these three things? Or, is there no connection?"

Following my questions, Toba-san smiled. It wasn't remotely friendly or warm. The smile on Toba-san's cold expression was saying: You don't know a thing, so of course you'd ask such a weird question.

There was no wind on the rooftop, the air was warm, and the weather was pleasant. Yet, I felt a chilling sensation in my bones.

"What're you going to do if you find out?" Toba-san asked. What she meant was: This happened so long ago, it's already over, isn't it?

No, it wasn't over yet.

"I'll go and apologise."

Toba-san raised her eyebrows and repeated, "Go and apologise?"

"Yes. Apologise."

"To who?"

"Isn't it obvious? … To Oreki."

In class, everyone had blamed Oreki for slacking, and had made him take all responsibility for causing trouble and ruining the final memory of middle school. From then until graduation, Oreki constantly avoided the classroom.

He'd go to the library to read his books. … And though I was there too,

I'd never so much as glanced his way.

Then, I graduated middle school and entered high school. When I met him once again in the library, I wasn't the least bit thrilled. Oreki was an unmotivated, unreliable person. He wasn't suited to be Fuku-chan's friend at all – back then, I hadn't fully understood them, and so I'd really felt that way.

The one cause for all that was the carving of that singular, straight vine. If it really was the result of laziness, every one of the third year students had a sound reason for bearing a grudge against Oreki.

But, what if it wasn't?

Toba-san teased me once more. "And what'll happen after that? He'll forgive you? Aren't you being a little unrealistic here?"

It seemed that she did know Oreki. As I raised my head, determined, Toba-san said, "It's already come to this. What else do you want to do? But… if you've always held a grudge against Oreki-san, that is a problem."

When she brought up Oreki's name, Toba-san's voice seemed to brighten, colouring itself with sentiment. The word "girlfriend", the word that I had refused to believe, came to my mind.

"Toba-san. To you, Oreki-san is…"

"He's probably my hero. You could call him that."

Hero? Oreki?

At that moment, a smile appeared on Toba-san's face.

I'd figure out what that meant later. I had to fish out some information

from her right now while that barrier of hers was down. So, I asked again,

“What about the graduation piece?”

“That’s… you could call that ‘a curse that’s already been broken’.”

“What did Oreki do with the graduation piece?”

Toba-san smiled and said, “Who knows? I don’t need to tell you everything. If you’d asked me this the year before, I’d have happily told you the whole story. … But, there’s one thing I can tell you for sure. Saying that you bear a grudge against Oreki - that’s something unforgivable.”

It was already too late to say anything in defence, so I didn’t bother to.

A light gust of wind blew across the roof. Without any safety railings up here, even a small wind was enough to make me uneasy. Toba-san rolled her shoulders, looking disinterested as she said, “If you want to know the truth, why don’t you go and have a look at that mirror? Though, you won’t be able to understand if you just stand in front of it. Alright, I’m in the middle of club activities now. You’re disturbing me. So could I please ask you to leave the roof?”

Then, she began to turn away.

I thought about Chi-chan’s smile, about the intriguing story Oreki had told yesterday.

“Wait. There’s one more thing.”

“… What is it now?”

Seeing Toba-san arch her eyebrow, I spoke up, determined not to repeat

this question a second time.

“Have you met Oreki-san since then?”

Luckily, Toba-san didn’t think too deep into the question.

“I want Oreki-san to stay a hero.”

“…”

“If we see each other and talk, I’d feel disgusted, wouldn’t I?”

She turned away after saying this, bending over to look into the viewfinder of her camera. I understood that she wasn’t going to answer any more of my questions.

5.

In the end, that mirror was the answer.

I came down from the roof, but didn't head for the Geography Room. It had come to this, so what was I going to do? Though I was unwilling to admit it, what Toba-san had said was correct. Using Toba-san's name, forcing Oreki to open his mouth, strangling the truth out of him, all just to find a reason for why I owed him an apology – it seemed a little inappropriate to do things that way.

I really wanted to know what Fuku-chan had to say about this. However, if it concerned the graduation project, Fuku-chan had been in a different class from Oreki and Toba-san. And, if Oreki was trying to hide something, and I were to get it out through Fuku-chan, that would be a despicable move on my part. For now, I'd just have to endure it. Endure it.

There was still some time before Kaburaya Middle School closed.

There were many places high school students couldn't go. Places that were against the law, where it was against regulations, or against the school's rules. There were many places that we weren't allowed to enter.

On the other hand, there were places that had no such restrictions, and yet no one would ever want to go there. An example was one's old middle school. I felt the same way about it.

When I reached the front gates of Kaburaya Middle School, I gazed at the marigolds and azaleas that had bloomed in the flowerbed in front of the entrance and felt my cheeks flush with the heat. The track team and baseball team were training out on the field, and I could just barely hear the school's band practicing. These aspects weren't all that different from Kamiyama High School's, so why did I find it so difficult to enter

Kaburaya Middle School?

The reason was clear. I had graduated from this school with all my smiles and tears. We weren't able to go back. We couldn't go back.

I examined my attire. All the people along this street would recognise this as the Kamiyama High School uniform. Maybe I should go home first and change into my middle school uniform? Fortunately, or rather, unfortunately, I hadn't grown at all since then. Though I'd grown a lot as a whole, I could no longer deny the number on my height chart. I wouldn't look out of place in a middle school uniform, would I?

I shook my head. What was I thinking? That was no different from a cosplay. Pondering over such a bad idea, I might as well just blow my cover now. Even if I felt a little uncomfortable, all I was doing was going inside a middle school. It wasn't something that required any sort of courage.

Okay, time to get moving.

Passing the school's gate, I noticed that I was walking off to one side.

There were three entryways in total – one for students, one for staff, and one for visitors. Walking to the visitor's entrance seemed redundant, so I considered sneaking in through the student's walkway. But, if I did that, I wouldn't be able to walk around inside the school – there wouldn't be any indoor shoes for outsiders to wear at the student's entrance. And so, although I wasn't a 'visitor', I had to regretfully make my way to the visitor's entrance.

If only there was a reception room*. "I'm Ibara, a graduate. Could I please come into the school for awhile?" "Sure!" If that was the case, then I could enter the school without any worry. However, the large door for Kaburaya Middle School visitors was wide open, and there was no one around. It seemed to say, 'Only those who don't have any

suspicious intentions would dare to come this way'. Even though I'd studied along these corridors before, it was hard not to feel tense. I quickly walked into the building, took off my shoes, and retrieved a pair of green indoor shoes which said 'Kaburaya Midlde School' from the shoe cupboard.

That mirror had been named "The Mirror of Memories". Even though it was rather plain, it was better than a strange name. I was still a student here when the mirror had been hung up, so I knew where it was: at the bottom of two staircases, on the opposite wall. I was scared of getting caught, but I walked forward firmly.

It was thirty minutes before the school's closing time. I could hear other people around the school, but I never met anyone along the corridor I walked down. If I could see a girl in a sailor uniform, I'd be able to think back to where I was two years ago, and let myself indulge in the warm memories. But there was no one in the hallway, so I mulled over Toba-san's words from start to finish. … A curse that was already broken.

What did that mean? If we were talking about a cursed mirror, then, Snow White? That would be a magic mirror. Would a two-sided mirror with different reflections at night be considered a cursed mirror? But "The Mirror of Memories" was one-sided. And what did "a curse that was already broken" mean, anyway?

As I mulled over these thoughts, I arrived in front of "The Mirror of Memories" without meeting a soul.

"… Was it always this small?"

This was the first thing that came to my mind.

If I were still in elementary school, I'd be surprised by how big it'd look to someone so small. I'd grown a lot taller since then. But I hadn't

grown at all since the last time I saw “The Mirror of Memories”. Despite this being the case, the mirror on the wall was disappointingly small to me.

Actually, no, it wasn’t. I could see my whole body in the mirror with room to spare. It must be about two meters tall. It was considered big. So, in other words, in the last year or so, the mirror I had in my mind was the one that had grown larger.

“It feels nostalgic. Of course it would.”

I stretched a hand out.

All of the graduating students - in theory, that is - had carved this mirror frame. I didn’t place much significance in that. But I had been there when the frame had been put together, and though it was the teacher that did the most work, I had felt a strong sense of accomplishment. The bird that pecked at the grapes on the left side of the mirror was, of course, carved by Mishima and I. Looking at it now, our 'swallow’ was indeed a hummingbird. If I had known this back then, I would have put in more effort towards the hummingbird.

Underneath the mirror was a plastic nameplate. “The Mirror of Memories (Designer: Ami Takasu)” had been written on it. Our year of graduation had also been included.

“Takasu-san’s name has been left behind, huh.”

I hadn’t noticed this nameplate when I was still a student here. Though I envied that Takasu-san’s name would forever remain in this school, I also felt relieved that it wasn’t my name.

There was one more thing that was different from the mental image I had of the mirror – the grapevines around the mirror were very thin. In my memory, the vines had taken up the full ten centimetres of wood. In

actual fact, the thickest vine seemed to be only two centimetres wide. The extra space was filled up by the vines coiling and twisting together.

I found myself whispering.

“I’d say it’s about 60 points.”

In my third year of middle school, I’d thought that this design was almost perfect.

But now, seeing it once again, it was just needlessly complex.

This was most obvious at the bottom of the mirror frame. The detail was much too intricate. The vines were all over the place, winding up and down, even turning in circles. This made it look complicated, and taking into account all the tree branches and numerous flying insects, the whole thing looked messy.

But, even though the bottom design was more complex, it wasn’t that terrible. The images on the upper part of the mirror simply looked much better.

Next…

I took a step back and gazed at the entire length of the mirror.

I had been paying attention to the mirror frame just now, and had ignored my reflection in the mirror. My reflection furrowed her brow and folded her arms.

“… So, a cursed mirror…”

The mirror itself was a typical one that a teacher had bought. Perhaps Fuku-chan would be able to explain the theory of pinholes, but I didn’t think that had anything to do with the curse.

What was cursed was probably the frame we'd carved.

"But she said it was 'already broken'."

I hesitated to think that Oreki was the one who had 'broken the curse'.

How could I put it? In the midst of all the tangles around the mirror, there was one horizontal line. My eyes were drawn towards it. That one straight vine. Oreki's carving.

The curse.

"Hm…"

What had Toba-san said? Oreki was a hero. She'd feel disgusted if they met, so she didn't want to meet her hero. And –

I wouldn't understand. She said if I just stood here, I wouldn't understand. 'You won't understand if you just stand in front of it'.

"Wait, that's not right."

That wasn't right. It wasn't. At that moment, I thought there was something more to Toba-san's words.

What Toba-san meant when she said "You won't be able to understand if you just stand in front of it" wasn't that I would never be able to understand the truth. Instead, she meant that I wouldn't be able to understand if I just stood here. I couldn't just stand. I had to…

Handstand.

"… But I'll end up flashing myself…"

If Fuku-chan were here, he could help hold up my skirt.

So now I had to do a handstand, or try to stand upside down in some way.

“Hm, let’s try this…”

I took my handphone out of my pocket.

Selecting the camera application, I pointed the phone’s camera at the mirror. In the mirror, my reflection held up her handphone too.

I’d picked for the shutter sound of my phone to make a simple “click”.

When the image appeared on the screen, I flipped my phone around.

Evening was slowly creeping into the hallways of the middle school. I murmured to myself.

“… So that’s it.”

6.

We were in the Geography Room.

Chi-chan wasn't around today. Oreki, Fuku-chan and I were in the clubroom.

Fuku-chan was talking about something. I'd probably heard it before. Oreki sat in his designated seat, and I wordlessly presented all the photos I'd printed out before him.

Oreki reacted with shock. That was natural. If someone were to put a large stack of photos in front of me, I'd be confused too. He didn't speak until I finished taking out all the photos, and neither did Fuku-chan.

The photos were of the lower part of the frame for the "The Mirror of Memories". There were fifteen photos in total, including one of Oreki's 'half-hearted' carving. Because I'd printed out fifteen pieces, my printer had run out of ink. I'd just have to take Fuku-chan along with me to buy some more next Sunday.

Noticing that I had stopped moving, Oreki asked,

"What's this?"

Still trying to act dumb to the very end.

"The graduation piece."

"Oh. Really."

"Your crude tone really pisses me off."

Oreki scratched his cheek.

“I went to see Toba-san yesterday. Oreki, did you know Toba-san’s in our school?”

Even though I’d asked, there was actually no need to. They’d been in the same school for over a year, it was hard to believe that they’d never crossed paths.

However, Oreki was an unfathomable person.

“Nope. This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Huh?”

“Is she doing well?”

Was that considered ‘doing well’? She had that barrier of hers that repelled anyone from getting close to her. Still, I could see where her principles had come from.

“Pretty well, I suppose.”

“That’s good to know.”

“She told me to do a handstand in front of the mirror.”

Then, I flipped all fifteen photos around. Beside Oreki, Fuku-chan didn’t say a word. This silence meant one thing: Satoshi Fukube knew what had happened between Oreki, Asami Toba, and the graduation piece.

At first glance, the photos depicted chaotic grapevines. But, if you turned them around, you’d be able to see a completely different picture.

A circular grapevine, when flipped over, became an “e”.

The cluster of vines, when flipped over, looked like a “W”.

Here was an “h”, there was an “A”. Because they were all handwritten letters that hadn’t been in my books, it had taken some time to decipher them.

The fifteen photos spelt out one sentence:

“We hate A ami T.”

“We hate Ami. That’s horrible. The graduation piece was actually hiding this message.”

Oreki had given up on his act. He nodded slightly and said,

“Yes. I feel the same way.”

“But, there’s a problem with the sentence.”

“Correct.”

“There’s a missing letter.”

“Yeah.”

“And it’s the part that you carved, isn’t it?”

I pointed at the space between “A” and “a”. Oreki nodded silently.

I didn’t need Oreki to confirm the rest. Oreki probably knew full well what it was that I had discovered.

The message that the coiled vines were supposed to hide had probably been “We hate Asami T”. But, because Oreki had left out one of the

letters, the sentence had changed.

The curse that was meant for Asami Toba had been broken.

At this point, I looked over at Fuku-chan.

“Hey, Fuku-chan, I went back to Kaburaya Middle yesterday.”

“Ah~ Is everyone doing alright?”

“No clue. I didn’t see anyone. But, I did see the nameplate underneath the mirror, the one that said that Ami Takasu was the designer.”

“Oh, so that happened.”

“Fuku-chan, you asked someone to do that, didn’t you?”

Fuku-chan and Oreki exchanged looks with each other.

Why hadn’t they told me about it? Even if they kept it from me, I would’ve been able to guess that something had been going on behind the scenes. Boys were weird. No, wouldn’t it be better to say that boys were unreasonable?*

Ami Takasu and her gang had wanted to terrorise and overwhelm Asami Toba. If the conflict had been serious enough, all the other classes would have gotten wind of it. However, I didn’t remember such a thing ever happening. So, it seemed that all this had been brewing right underneath the surface. Perhaps it had started at a cram school* outside of school, or somewhere like that.

Ami Takasu had been the designer of the graduation project, and in it, she included her final ploy. It would have been a message presented from the entire graduating class to Asami Toba, a message that would continue to be passed down in Kaburaua Middle School – “We hate

Asami Toba".

Unfortunately for her, Oreki had found this out. The part that he was in charge of was supposed to conceal the flipped letter "s". But, with only this, he wouldn't have known what the entire message was. This was because every group only received a picture of their portion of the design. Oreki felt suspicious, and had probably gone to Fuku-chan. Fuku-chan had been the one in charge of overseeing the graduation project. He must have had a copy of the complete design.

Oreki and Fuku-chan had uncovered the entire message after looking at the full design. At that point, it had been too late to stop the project, so the only thing they could do was to change the message.

It was no wonder that Ami Takasu-san had cried so hard in the cold school gym on the day we assembled the mirror frame. The message that was supposed to torment "Asami T" had somehow become a torment for "ami T".

"Toba-san says she thinks of you as her hero," I told Oreki.

I scrutinized him.

As expected. Oreki's face was red. Once I discovered the hidden message, I also understood the reason why Oreki was avoiding and concealing what had happened. He had saved Toba-san. Because of this, Oreki felt embarrassed. The person who was always going on about "energy conversation" had actually saved a girl on impulse. He probably didn't want anyone to know about this.

Just how stupid was he?

"I didn't think that the truth would come to light today. It looks like I've underestimated Mayaka, huh?" Fuku-chan said in a light-hearted tease.

After heaving a sigh, Oreki turned to Fuku-chan and said, “Back then, I was thinking about whether or not to change the vine into a ‘t’ shape.”

“Really? That’s not a bad idea.”

If Oreki’s part was a “t” then it would become…. “We hate Atami T”.

“But, you know, I don’t actually hate the Atami Sea.”

I couldn’t believe them, using such petty tricks in response to me. I’d known these two for so long, and could read their little manoeuvres. Oreki and Fuku-chan were employing jokes to write this incident off as something that was already over. I knew what they were doing from the start.

Not wanting them to have their way, I spoke loudly.

“I’m sorry, Oreki. I never thought that you would do this sort of thing, and I looked down on you. I’m really very sorry.”

Oreki was so flustered that his eyes darted all over the room. Finding the paperback on the table, he pulled it up with relief. It was as if he was holding a book of incantations*. And then, glancing to the side, he said,

“Okayokayokayokayokay, just keep the photos. … Looking at them is distracting*.”

If only I had a mirror. I wanted to show Oreki just what kind of face he was making.

3 - Is it Sunny in the Mountains?

A helicopter flew by after school.

The chopping sounds of the rotations grew nearer and nearer—almost surprisingly close—and didn't seem to be going away. The noise was directly overhead for so long that I even started to think it might be landing in the school's yard, but finally, it disappeared off into the distance.

There were four of us in the Earth Sciences lecture room, the Classics Club room. I was reading a book, Satoshi was doing some kind of homework, and Chitanda and Ibara were off in a corner, talking and giggling about who-knows-what.

With the helicopter's massive noise, however, the situation in the room almost seemed to freeze. After the sound disappeared, a mutual silence descended upon the room. It felt a little strange. Although I wasn't making it a point to try and break the silence, I spoke up suddenly.

"A helicopter, huh?" I had already heard the sound of helicopters countless times in the past, but this time, it brought something to mind. "Ogi liked helicopters, didn't he?"

I had directed that statement at Satoshi and Ibara, but Chitanda was the one who responded instead.

"Ogi-san? Are you talking about Takahiro Ogi from Class 2-B?"

"Who?"

"From Class 2-B, like I said."

How would I, a freshman who had never associated with any school activities outside of the Classics Club, possibly know the name of a sophomore? I closed the book in my hands.

"You don't know the ‘Ogi’ I'm talking about. He was an English teacher back in our middle school. Satoshi, you remember him, right?"

As I asked this, Satoshi placed his mechanical pencil on the desk. He tilted his head, somewhat in apparent uncertainty.

"Of course I remember Mr. Ogi. He was my homeroom teacher in my last year there. It's just that I had no idea he liked helicopters."

It was my turn to be taken aback. Satoshi was usually the one equipped with all sorts of detailed knowledge on myriad subjects.

"I thought it was pretty well-known. That he liked helicopters, that is."

As I said this, I glanced over at Ibara. I figured at least she'd know.

The three of us—Satoshi, Ibara, and I—had all come to Kamiyama High School from Kaburaya Middle School. Chitanda alone was different. Even though Ibara definitely noticed me staring at her, her gaze was completely in the opposite direction. All she said was, "Okay."

Something was off. Did Satoshi and Ibara really not know anything? I wasn't the kind of person who takes special interest in observing the faculty at our school. The fact that someone like me knew about it while they didn't was dubious at best. Not to mention, Ibara and I were always in the same class back then. There's no way she didn't know about it.

"Don't you remember what happened, Ibara? I don't remember when it was, but a helicopter flew over Kaburaya at some point."

"Yeah, like how many times?"

There wasn't an ounce of warmth in her response. I don't think I've ever even seen what a friendly Ibara looked like.

"I'm talking about a specific time. Ogi stopped teaching all of a sudden and walked over to the window to look up at the sky. He stayed there the entire time, from when it got close to when it eventually disappeared, and then laughed it off, saying, 'I like helicopters' or something like that before continuing the lesson."

"Hm," Ibara started to say as her face scrunched up, trying to remember.

"Now that you mention it, you might be right. I think something like that did happen, actually. Was that really Ogi?"

"Yeah, it was."

What a relief. I guess it wasn't just my imagination.

On the other hand, however, Satoshi continued to tilt his head in uncertainty. Back and forth, left and right. Maybe it was some sort of exercise to loosen up his shoulders? He stopped moving all at once and then finally interjected.

"Something's not right about that."

"Right or wrong, I definitely remember it happening."

"But there was a time back when a bunch of SDF helicopters flew by in a squadron over our school. It was a huge spectacle, but I don't remember Mr. Ogi reacting at all."

I had a couple questions.

"What do you mean by 'in a squadron?'"

"In formation."

"How did you know it was the SDF?"

"I can't imagine who else would fly a bunch of helicopters in a V-formation like that."

That makes sense. I had one more question remaining.

"Are you dead certain Ogi was there at the time?"

"I think it was him, at least. I remember looking up 'ATM' in the dictionary when I saw the helicopters and made the connection... which meant I was in English class, and Mr. Ogi was the teacher. I only ever had him for that class."

I bet Ibara and Chitanda were trying to figure out what helicopters and automatic teller machines had in common. This ATM is an abbreviation for anti-tank missiles, the kind that military helicopters often came equipped with. But I digress.

"You have a point. If something like that flew over the school, then I could imagine Ogi would've ran outside and danced in the schoolyard."

"I don't think he would've danced, though."

It was just an example.

It looked like Ibara was also trying hard to remember what she could. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure it was Mr. Ogi that got all happy when he saw the helicopter. That was a while ago... probably right after we started our first year there."

"Now that you mention it, I remember thinking 'this school has some really weird teachers' when it happened," I commented.

"But just like Fuku-chan said, I don't remember him reacting to any helicopters after that."

Right after we started our first year there, huh? My memories are all hazy, but I think Ibara was right. I don't remember anything like that happening later.

Satoshi also seemed to remember something. "You know, though, if it's Ogi-sensei we're talking about, then there was something way more interesting that—The Shocking Legend of Ogi!"

"Stop making stuff up."

I figured Satoshi was just going to make up some tall tale or something, but instead, he looked surprisingly earnest.

"No, I'm serious. I'm not making anything up. He told us himself."

He always did love his stories. I stayed quiet, and in return, he smiled to the brim and started preparing as if he were about to deliver an epic saga.

"The thing about Mr. Ogi, you see... I didn't believe it at first either. I'm not sure you'll be able to come to terms with it, even if I do tell you. I wouldn't say it's beyond the realm of possibility, but—"

"Get to the point already."

"According to the man himself, he's been hit by lightning three times in his life so far."

As far as Chitanda was concerned, Ogi was simply a stranger who loved helicopters and withdrawing money from ATMs. Sure she had boundless curiosity, but there was no way she'd get interested in something like this. She didn't really add anything to the conversation but spoke up regardless.

"Oh really? You mean like lightning, lightning?" she asked as she pointed her finger to the ceiling. Satoshi nodded.

"Yeah. Thunder!"

I'd never heard about this story before. I silently turned to look at Ibara, and judging by the way she shook her head slightly back at me, it looked like she hadn't either.

Chitanda's brow began to clench furiously. Come on, you don't even know him...

"And three times at that. It's a miracle he was okay." she responded.

"The thunder hit him just like that!"

It was unfortunate that I heard that. I'd be doing myself a favor if I pretended I never heard it.

"It's not like it hit him directly, but he said it still messed him up. He said that it once it knocked him unconscious, I think. He was laughing about it, saying he still has the burn scar to prove it," said Satoshi.

"I see... But at least he's still alive. That's the silver lining," Chitanda responded.

It's true—getting hit by lightning could definitely lead to death in a lot of situations. Ogi didn't have any obvious injuries as far as I saw, and while he was pretty short, he seemed like a really healthy guy. Considering that was after being hit by lightning three times, calling it a silver lining felt like an understatement.

It did start to bug me though. Hit by lightning? And to top it off, three times? Is that even possible?

Kamiyama City wasn't known for having frequent lightning storms, and yet only Ogi managed to get struck three times? I wasn't necessarily calling Satoshi a liar. Sure, he fabricated stories every now and then, but he never once prefaced those with a: "I'm not making anything up!"

So, was Ogi the liar? That also seemed unlikely. There were lots of guys that liked to play up their own misfortune, but saying "I was hit by lightning three times" seemed, I don't know, way too obvious to be a lie.

A tiny fraction of an idea started to form as I racked my mind for an explanation. It wasn't a very cheerful one.

"Satoshi, do they have old newspapers at the library?" I asked.

Satoshi looked a little dissatisfied with the conversation changing so suddenly, but he still answered my question.

"Yeah. The school's library has some too."

"Mhm, but ours only has scraps related to the school itself," Ibara chimed in.

Oh yeah, that's right. I almost forgot, Ibara worked in the library. When I occasionally went there, I usually saw her behind the counter.

This didn't have anything to do with Kamiyama High School, so there probably wouldn't be enough information. I grabbed my bag.

"I'm leaving now. I'm going to drop by the library, wanna come?"

As I said this to Satoshi, he returned a distrusting expression. "What's going on here? It almost looks like you're starting to get motivated."

Was I getting motivated? I don't think I'd call it that. It was really tugging at my mind, so I couldn't really help feeling...

"I'm curious"

The second I muttered that, it almost felt as if the atmosphere around me changed. No, it definitely did. Satoshi covered his mouth with his hands, and Ibara made a face that looked as if she had suddenly eaten something sour.

Satoshi started to gesture wildly and said, "Houtarou? It is you, right? Oreki Houtarou? You haven't been taken over by aliens, right? Or were you possessed by Chitanda?"

"I'm standing right here you know," Chitanda interjected.

"I think you'd better go home right away, Oreki. Go straight home and get some rest. Wrap yourself up nice and warm and I'm sure you'll feel all better tomorrow," Ibara quickly continued.

...Was it really that strange for me to do something spontaneous like this? I'd say it was as spontaneous as spontaneous breathing, honestly. I had no idea when the library closes, but I doubt it was open 24/7. It'd be a pain if it was closed by the time I got there. I'll forego inviting this rude bunch and try to make it quick.

As I got up to do just that, someone else stood up from their chair at the exact same time. It was Chitanda.

"Oreki-san, you're curious, aren't you!?"

"I guess so, yeah."

"Are you going to try and find out the answer?"

"There's a chance nothing will come up, but it's probably the best chance I

have."

"I'm curious!"

W-what the heck? Chitanda quickly made her way over to where I was, pushing her way past the desks and chairs as she did so. She finally stopped about one meter away, and her black eyes fixed on mine.

"To think there was something that could possibly capture your interest, Oreki-san... I want to know what that is! I'm curious!"

Oh.

This one’s a pain in my side as well.

Satoshi apparently had to finish his homework, so he didn’t join us. Then again, it's not like I'd be devastated if he wasn't able to in the first place. Honestly speaking, it would've been a big help if Ibara was able to come, considering she worked as one of the high school's library staff, but the two of us weren't really close enough to make requests of each other like that.

That meant only Chitanda was waiting next to the school's front gates.

Then was the moment that most students started to finish up with their club activities. Students in their school uniforms started to crowd the entrance on their way home from the club-filled high school with no end in sight. The students in athletic clubs were still out on the school grounds, but it looks like, for the most part, things were wrapping up right about now. I could see girls from the track club carrying hurdles over their shoulders and boys on the baseball team walking around the diamond as they picked up the various bases.

I always walked to school, but Chitanda had a bike. I guess she wasn't waiting, strictly speaking, as I saw her nonchalantly pedal on over from the bicycle parking lot behind the school.

"Shall we be on our way, then?"

As she said that, something suddenly dawned on me.

At this time, there were students on their way home around us as far as the eye could see. For Chitanda and I to go to the library together, she'd have to get off her bike and push it amidst the crowd. I pictured the scene in my head.

That would probably be impossible. No surprise there.

"Go on ahead."

Chitanda glanced at me. "You can get on..."

...she said.

Me sitting behind Chitanda as she pedaled... I pictured the scene in my head.

That would definitely be impossible.

Now that I think about it, there was no reason she should've waited here in the first place. If she wanted to know what I was going to look up, then it'd be better for us to meet up at the library. Instead of just telling her to go on ahead again, I'll give her something to start with. She began to pedal off.

I thought for a little and then called out to her, "Hey, Chitanda."

"Yes?" Still upright on the bike, she paused and turned on her shoulders to look back at me.

"When you get to the library, check to see if you can search the old newspapers electronically. If you can, can you search for articles that mentions the name Masakiyo Ogi?"

"I understand. See you later then."

I saw her off as she pedaled away, and I couldn't help but think the bicycle didn't really suit her. Though, no matter how girlish she was, that's not to say I imagined her in some kind of horse-drawn carriage or rickshaw either...

I blended in once more with the rest of the leaving students. I'd keep Chitanda waiting if I walked too slowly. Running there would of course go against my energy conservation policy, but a faster pace wouldn't hurt at least.

I stared down at my feet as I briskly walked. The city library wasn't that far off from my normal route home; all I had to do was take a quick detour. It was the path I've already gotten so used to, following alongside the river. Sometimes I went around it on rainy days to go through the roof-covered shopping street with the arcade in it, but for the most part, I came and went on this street. The crowd of students that originally gathered at the school's entrance gradually thinned out more and more—maybe some going to their house, others to cram school, and so on—and eventually I was the only Kamiyama High student still walking along the river.

I was a little tired from walking so fast, so I raised my chin and brought my head up. I realized there was a compact car coming from behind, and I moved to the side of the road. Finally looking up in front of me, I saw the familiar sight of the snow-capped Kamikakiuchi mountain range towering like always in a line in the distance.

Kamiyama City was located at the base of this Kamikakiuchi range. If you leave the city—on a school trip, for example—you'll realize that the mountains continue on like an enormous screen, and it inspires a sense of freedom and unease at the same time. The massive range, its tallest ridge stretching along 3000 meters above the ground, prevents even the atmosphere from passing, and the weather on both sides are completely different as a result. Apparently. I've never actually seen it for myself. That's what was written in a textbook I read once, and my sister gave the same account.

My sister as well, the kind of person that traveled all over Japan and the world with a "I'm going out for a bit," went to the mountain range that towered before me countless times. For the many things Tomoe Oreki was, however, a mountain climber was apparently not one of them. I'm pretty sure all she conquered was the easier half of the range, with mountains directed at beginners at only 2000 meters high.

I was also taken there once in elementary school. It goes without saying that

hiking is the antithesis of my energy conservation principles. I'll probably never set foot on a mountain again.

There was still some time left before evening. It wasn't like I forgot about Chitanda, but I took a second to gaze at the line of mountains I should've been so used to seeing.

It wasn't by coincidence that I was preoccupied with the Kamikakiuchi range.

Noticing as I entered the library, Chitanda approached me with soft steps and handed over a printed-out sheet of paper.

"I found some information on Ogi-san."

She didn't really have to print it out for me. I'm pretty sure copies costed 10 yen per page, so I fished out a 10 yen coin from my wallet and offered it to her. She accepted it silently.

What Chitanda found was a newspaper article from last year.

"Kamikakiuchi Range Trail Beautification"

The beautification of the Mt. Abumi trail, organized by the Kamiyama Mountaineering Club, is now underway as of the 26th. 11 members, including volunteers, have participated in removing trash from the trail and the surrounding areas. Masakiyo Ogi (39), president of the Kamiyama Mountaineering Club commented, "With hiking becoming more popular in recent years, more and more hikers aren't careful in how they treat their surroundings. I wish people were aware of how their poor manners affect the mountain."

"I see Mr. Ogi was a mountain climber," said Chitanda. My expression probably darkened a little as she peered at me before continuing. "Umm... is something wrong?"

"Not really. Did you search all the old magazines?"

"I couldn't look at anything older than five years, but you can request that at the counter over there."

As she said this, she started to look a little more uncertain about my attitude.

Hearing that he was struck by lightning three times got me wondering... Was it even possible for something like that to happen on flat ground?

I guess it was. I have heard stories of people from all over the world surviving even after being struck dozens of times by lightning. I pursued a different line of thought, however, and it looks like I was right.

That said, I really wish I wasn't. As this thought went through my mind, I approached the counter.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for a newspaper article," I asked the young woman with silver-rimmed glasses sitting there in front of a computer.

"Okay. What are you searching for?"

I requested an article from the year I entered middle school, some time from April to May.

The sound of clicking keys continued uninterrupted for a moment. Instead of checking the keyboard or the monitor, she continued to look in my direction as she typed. "Do you have any keywords?"

I thought for a second. "Try 'stranded.'"

Without asking why or even changing her expression, she entered it into the computer.

I wonder if she's a librarian. Before, I was under the impression that everyone who worked in a library was a librarian. Some time ago, Ibara found out about this understanding of mine for some reason or another and made fun of me for it. Setting aside whether she was a librarian or a part-time worker, she did a pretty quick job. Almost immediately, she had a list

of the newspaper articles that fit my request.

"There are twelve hits. Would you like to narrow down your search even more?" she asked.

"There’s not very many results. Could you just show them to me, please?" I responded.

The woman turned the monitor so that it faced me. It looked like the database didn't actually contain the articles themselves, but was just a means by which to search for them. Only the headlines were displayed, but among them, I found the words that confirmed my suspicions.

—"Hikers Stranded in Kamikakuchi Range, Search at Standstill"

"...It's from May 9th. It says the newspaper it's from right here. Let's go find it," said Chitanda.

There wasn't a trace of lightheartedness in her voice.

Chitanda was never good at figuring things out. Even if I realized it, Ibara realized it, and Satoshi realized it, Chitanda alone would all too often be stuck clueless. From how she sounded now, though, it was probably safe to assume she already figured out what happened. I silently followed after her as she led the way.

Although we were looking for the article without any help, it wouldn't take too long to find it as long as we knew the date. Not even a minute passed before we did. It was Friday, May 9th's morning edition. The reason Kabuyara Middle School's English teacher Mr. Ogi said he liked helicopters likely came from what happened on this day.

The article went like this:

"Two Kamiyama Mountaineering Club Members Reported Stranded"

On the 8th, Kamiyama authorities were notified that Kouichi Tawarada (43) and Isao Muraji (40) failed to return from their hike at the time they designated in advance. Both are members of the Kamiyama Mountaineering

Club and reportedly went hiking on Mt. Shikoro in the Kamikakiuchi range. A rescue party was dispatched, but efforts have been at a standstill due to inclement weather in the surrounding areas. Prefectural authorities transferred a rescue helicopter to the local police, and an aerial search is scheduled to take place once weather conditions improve.

"Which means... what?"

Chitanda likely already knew the gist of what happened; she just didn't want to have to put it into words. All of this was my idea, so it was probably my responsibility to be the one who answered.

"What this means is that Ogi didn't really like helicopters."

There were more people in the library than I expected there would be in the evening. I saw children and elderly people, Kamiyama High School students wearing the same uniform as us, and even what looked to be students from other schools. I guess we should be quiet in a library. I lowered my voice a little.

"Ogi was struck by lightning three times. This is probably the truth, but I wasn't so sure about how it happened with him being a normal middle school English teacher. So that's what got me thinking. What if he frequently went to places where lightning struck more often?"

"In the mountains, you mean," replied Chitanda.

"Yeah. I thought, what if Ogi was not only a teacher, but a mountain climber as well? That's when I immediately put two and two together and realized the meaning behind why Ogi said he liked helicopters that day. I didn't want to believe it, so that's why I came here to check."

And now, we have the article from the past here in front of us—an article about two stranded members from his mountaineering club.

"Why did Ogi go over the window to check out the helicopter that day? It's because that helicopter had a special significance. Maybe the helicopter

flying overhead was important to him somehow, I figured.

"To expand on that, he absolutely needed to know whether or not the helicopter was able to fly. That's why, when he heard the helicopter's sound, he went to see it himself immediately without even thinking.

It was impossible to understand anything from just seeing an English teacher show interest in helicopters.

If you changed "English teacher" to "mountain climber," however, that opened up many more possibilities. Not to mention Kamiyama City was the home of the Kamikakiuchi mountain range, its tallest ridge stretching along at 3000 meters above the ground. If you started wondering why a *mountain climber* was so preoccupied with helicopters being able to fly, then it wouldn't take anyone very long to come up with some possibilities. The things that linked mountain climbing and helicopters were aerial photography and transportation. If it was neither of those two... then it could only be rescue.

Chitanda's voice was also in a whisper, although I got the feeling it wasn't only because we were in a library.

"This article says that the weather on the 8th was really bad, so helicopters wouldn't be able to fly."

"That's right."

I didn't say anything after that. She probably understood it as well. I won't say anything pointless.

What Ogi wanted to know was probably if the helicopter on standby with the Kamiyama City police was able to fly there. In class, as he taught his 7th graders the ABCs, he wondered if the weather in the distant Kamikakiuchi range ever recovered. If the range cleared up, the helicopter would fly. If the helicopter flew, then the two who were stranded would have a better chance of being saved.

"How must he have felt..."

As Chitanda muttered this, I once again recalled what happened three years

ago.

Ogi had rushed to the window, and once the sound of the helicopter finally died off into the distance, he returned to his podium. *"I like helicopters"* was his excuse. I think I remember what his face looked like then. Maybe my memory's off.

"I don't know how he felt, but I'm pretty sure he was smiling."

Maybe it was just because he was in front of his students.

In the newspaper published a couple days after that one, it said the remains of the two stranded mountaineering club members were finally discovered.

It was the police helicopter that found them.

When we left the library, the sun was already setting, unsurprisingly. Although this was just a small detour for me, Chitanda and I lived in different directions. As we exited from the front, and I was getting ready to say my goodbyes, Chitanda suddenly started to say something.

"Umm..."

"Hmm?"

She turned to face me.
Her head seemed to hang almost imperceptibly.

"May I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Why were you curious?"

That, huh? I smiled sourly before realizing it. "Is me being spontaneous like this really so strange?"

Chitanda smiled as well. "I suppose I would say so, yes. It is very unlike

you."

"Well, I guess 'if I don't have to do it, I won't,' after all."

"No, that's not what I meant."

She immediately shot down my go-to motto. Hesitating somewhat, she continued.

"Oreki-san, you do so much for other people. You've helped me countless times as well. You never worry about things related to yourself, though. So then why today of all days did you want to find out about something you were unsure of...? I'm sorry, I can't help myself. I'm so curious."

I felt like she was wrong about one thing—really, really wrong.

I get the feeling that clearing up that misunderstanding would take a while, though. It was already getting dark out. I decided to make it quick and just answer her question.

"When I heard the story about the lightning, I made an unfortunate inference in my head."

"Yes, that's what you told me."

"If that inference was correct, I'd need to be more careful from then on. That's why I came here to confirm it."

If we were talking an involved week-long investigation, then that would be a different story, but if it just took rummaging around some old newspapers to find the answer, then it wasn't really a problem. I even had some help.

Chitanda still looked confused about the whole thing.

"Be careful?"

"After knowing about that incident, I can't just go around and say whatever I want about Ogi liking helicopters. That'd be insensitive. Of course I'd have to be more careful," I responded casually.

For some reason, though, Chitanda's massive eyes were fully open. It looked to me as if she was completely taken aback. Out of reflex, I started to worry that I accidently said something bad. I tried to think and expand on what I meant.

"By insensitive, I mean like, 'You have no idea what you're talking about!' kind of thing. Though, I'll probably never see Ogi again, so I guess I have no idea what I'm talking about..."

"Oreki-san, that's so...," Chitanda suddenly said to me.

Her mouth moved as if tripping over her words, and then she stared blankly at me. What finally came out was a single sentence.

"I can't really put it into words."

I didn't have the slightest idea of what she was trying to tell me. Well, if she couldn't put it into words, then I wouldn't really be able to listen to those words either.

"Alright, well, see you. Thanks for helping me out."

"You're very welcome. Goodbye."

It was a short exchange. Chitanda's house was far—even though she had a bike, it'd be completely dark by the time she'd arrive. She was the one who wanted to come, but still, I felt a little guilty about the whole thing. I definitely owe her for this.

On my way home, I suddenly looked up in front of me.

The mountains of Kamikakiuchi were already completely enveloped in the darkness.

4 - Our Legendary Volume

1.

What was the first manga I ever read, I wonder? It happened when I was so young that I'll never be truly certain, no matter how many possible titles come to mind. All I warmly remember is how absorbed in it I was.

In my home's living room stood a single bookshelf, and on that bookshelf sat only dust-covered encyclopedias and literary anthologies that I had never even seen so much as taken out of their cases—there was no manga at all. I had my first experience with it because of my aunt, my mother's sister. She had a crude house made of steel, as rough as it was ugly, but it contained bookshelves of dizzying heights, filled to the brim with books, around half of which were volumes of manga from all ages.

It became a daily routine of mine. I would drop off my little backpack at home after returning from a day at elementary school and then immediately go on over to my aunt's house, reading manga until I eventually went home for dinner. Whenever I visited, my aunt, the polar opposite of my mother, would always smile and pat my head, saying, *manga maniac Maya-chan's here again!*, before leaving me to my own devices. Thinking back on it now, she probably moved the manga with unsafe scenes to the top shelves, beyond my elementary schooler arm's reach.

The turning point came when I was in third grade. As far as I can remember... I had just finished reading "Phoenix," by Osamu Tezuka. It might've actually been "Wild 7" or "Toward the Terra," but at any rate, I was reading, eyes glued to the pages, like I always had been when my aunt unexpectedly walked in and offered me a snacks. I was a light eater as a child, so she normally refrained from feeding me anything that might make me lose my appetite for dinner, but on that day, she had been given some high-quality watermelon and apparently wanted me to try some as well.

"You should have some watermelon too, Maya-chan," she said to me. I feel bad saying it, but I don't remember its taste one bit. What *did* stay with me, though, was something she said as she talked absentmindedly during our snack.

"Books are strange, aren't they? It doesn't matter the least bit who you are. To think that anyone can write them..."

I have no clue where that thought of hers came from. It could've been that she was talking about how even though driving cars and operating machinery required licenses, it was interesting how writing a book could be done by anyone. With that single phrase, however, something incredible dawned on me.

I see... There's no reason someone like me couldn't draw manga.

As I realized this, the floodgates opened, and I immediately started to draw that very evening. I had never disliked drawing itself, and to add to that, I often got the highest scores possible in my art class. I was certain of it: even I could draw manga! How long did it take for that confidence of mine to crumble, I wonder. Ten minutes? Fifteen? As I look back now on the terrible drawings I did back then, I can't help but cry. At the time, it was so frustrating, so miserable... The words, "It wasn't supposed to be like this," formed behind my clenched teeth. I softly cursed at myself as tears dropped onto the paper below, and then at last, my resolve solidified with a final cry of frustration.

Ever since that day, I've continued to draw unrelentingly.

The monthly manga magazine, *La Shin*, was originally sold as an extra volume to the similarly purposed *Shin Soh*. The name apparently derived from the Japanese onomatopoeia for lots of silence, but the contents ended up being pretty different. Unlike the mainly shounen *Shin Soh*, *La Shin* was more neutral, or to put it differently, the kind of magazine that seemed to welcome anyone of any age, as long as they liked manga. There were quite a number of magazines out there that I wouldn't mind slapping the "For all manga lovers!" label on, but *La Shin* specifically didn't really cater to any one niche, I guess, and they generally didn't publish anything too difficult for the average person to get behind. Even if I didn't have the pocket change or the time to read every manga magazine as they came out, I would still make sure to buy the latest issue of *La Shin* every month without fail on its release day, the 18th.

Like many other magazines, *La Shin* accepted manga submissions and also offered an award for newcomers called the New World Prize. It is handed out four times a year, and in addition to the chosen work—itself published in that month's issue—the titles of twenty or so other runner-ups each receives an honorable mentions shout-out with a short comment.

The 18th of February fell on a terribly cold Sunday. As snow fell tirelessly and without rest, continuing to bury the city, I headed, scarf wrapped around my ears and covered head-to-toe in cold-resistant clothes, towards the Kobundo bookstore next to the highway. Even I didn't really want to be out on an accident-prone day like this one, but it was for the latest issue of *La Shin*, after all. That said, even though I bought each issue every month, that didn't necessarily mean I had to get it the very day it came out. The thing was, though, today's March issue was a different story altogether.

I plodded, step-by-step, through the ankle-deep snow, and after I finally arrived at Kobundo—my journey taking five times longer than it usually did—I took a second to relax and deeply inhale the warm interior air. I carefully went over every inch of my clothes to brush off the snow, and once I was certain I wouldn't accidentally get any of the books wet, I went over to the magazine shelf.

From a results perspective, all of my efforts were in vain. The latest *La Shin* issue hadn't arrived yet. According to the shop employee, the shipments sometimes moved forward or back a day if the official release date fell on a Sunday. There was nothing I could do about that, so I simply had to trudge my way back home.

After school the next day, I managed to get one of my friends to cover for me at the library and left the campus as fast as possible, going to neither the Manga Research Society nor the Classics Club. I ran as quickly as I could along the snow-cleared sidewalks and finally burst into Kobundo. I grabbed an issue of *La Shin*, tied shut with plastic string to prevent anyone from reading before buying, held it close to my pounding chest, and headed towards the cash register. I'd seen the girl behind the counter here before, and in her usual sweet voice, she asked, "Would you like a bag?"

"Yes, please," I replied, nervously swallowing as I did so.

"Would you like me to cut the string for you?"

My cheeks burned up as I wondered what she must've been thinking of me. Her expression contained nothing out of the ordinary, however, so I replied, "Yeah," and she went to take out some scissors and did just that.

I went outside with the bag and immediately pulled the magazine out. There probably weren't that many people who'd start reading their purchase the second they left the shop. Although a bit concerned about being seen by anyone I knew, I shuffled through the pages.

14th New World Prize winner: "Tanuki Counterattack" by Mamoru Mamiana.

I've never heard of him before. I hope it's good.

I went to look at the other notable selections. Each of them had a single panel published in the magazine, but none of them looked familiar... In other words, mine wasn't chosen.

I looked up at the clear winter sky; the breath that escaped my long sigh turned white.

The participation awards went to... Ichitarou Tasaka, MILULU, Kinsuke Shouda, Satou Georgia, Kaoru Yajima, Kazuru Ihara, Enma Haru...

"Wait, wha..."

A strange noise came from my mouth. A man walking into the store glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, but I didn't feel even a shred of embarrassment.

"No... way..."

Kazuru Ihara! "The Island with the Tower!"

It was published! *My* story with *my* drawings was published under *my* pen name in *La Shin!'s* March issue.[1]

I closed the magazine and then, trembling, opened it a second time. Maybe

it was some kind of mistake, I figured. Maybe, once I opened it again, the contents would change.

But they didn't.

2.

It was a sunny Monday in May, and I headed to the school library after homeroom finished. I belonged to the Manga Society, Classics Club, and Library Committee, and although I normally only worked there on Friday, Monday was when we were training the new recruits that joined in April, so I figured taking care of the returned books was the least I could do. I finished putting all of them away without a hitch, but there was still some time left in the day. I figured it might be a good idea to drop by the Manga Society, but instead I walked to the very end of the special wing's fourth floor, towards the Classics Club.

Upon sliding open the earth sciences lecture room door, I was instantly greeted by familiar, cheery voices.

"Hey, Mayaka! Perfect timing. Come look at this."

Seeing Fuku-chan in the center of the room, beckoning me over with his hand, my mouth subconsciously curved into a smile.

All of the sophomores were here, but it looked like the freshman didn't come today. Satoshi Fukube and Eru Chitanda—Fuku-chan and Chi-chan—were sitting side-by-side, looking at some kind of pamphlet spread open on their desks. Oreki was in a seat some distance away, staring outside the window with a sour face.

"Yeah? What is it?"

I dropped my bag on a nearby desk and walked over to the two, and Chitanda held up the pamphlet for me to see, her face brimming with a wide smile. The cover read "Kamiyama City Book Report Contest Results."

"It's from four years ago, but I happened to come across it as I was cleaning my room yesterday. I opened it up out of curiosity and saw an unexpected name," Chi-chan said. She opened the pages with her slender fingers, and I looked at the contents:

First place: "My Opinions on 'Blue Bird,' by Ami Kojima"

Second place: "My Opinions on 'Salamander,' by Jirou Miyama"

Third place: "My Opinions on 'Run, Melos!' by Houtarou Oreki"[2]

Four years ago meant we were in 6th grade at the time.

"Mayaka-san, you were in the same class as Oreki-san, right?" asked Chi-chan.

Right. As regrettable as it was, I was in the same class as him for all of elementary and middle school, so I vaguely remembered he got an award in some book report contest. I never read his submission, though. I had no idea it'd been recorded in the pamphlet.

"Melos, huh. Doesn't seem like something Oreki would write about."

"Come on, Mayaka. Do you honestly think Oreki would pick a story about friendship like that? It was probably just a topic that was assigned to him," Satoshi said.

Chitanda pondered a little bit and then started to speak.

"When I was in 7th grade, I'm fairly sure I had to read Alex Hacke's *Little King December* for the summer vacation book report."

Now that she mentioned it, I feel like I had to read the same one.

The three of us fixated our eyes on Oreki at the same time. He turned away but eventually gave into the silence and let out a small sigh before turning back to face us.

"It was one of the recommended books at the library... Besides, it was short."

Oh. It made sense if that was the reason.

Fuku-chan smiled gleefully, clearly having a great time.

"So anyways, Mayaka. This book report is quite the masterpiece, you see. It really brought tears to my eyes; you can definitely imagine it was written by the 7th grade Houtarou."

Chi-chan nodded and also piped in, "I was also very fascinated by it. I could never write something like this."

Hearing them talk about it to that extent made me a little curious as well, but I figured I'd at least ask Oreki about it first.

"Can I?"
Although he looked back with a sullen, dissatisfied expression, he responded, "It's not like that pamphlet belongs to me."

Instead of replying with a simple "I don't want you to," he said it that was public information, even though he might've not liked that fact, and implied that he couldn't say no... I swear, he never changes. I thanked Chi-chan and happily took the pamphlet from her hands.

I'm sure the original was handwritten, but it was converted into print for the pamphlet.

My Opinions on "Run, Melos!"

Houtarou Oreki

I read "Run, Melos." It was interesting. I was glad that Melos was able to save Selinuntius. I was also glad that King Dionys had a change of heart. I thought it would be nice if that change lasted for a long time.

Originally, there was no need for Melos to run at all. His village and the castle were only ten Chinese miles apart—or forty kilometers in today's terms—so even if he walked, it would only take him around ten hours. The reason Melos ran at the start was to force himself to cut ties with his home, so when he was far enough away from the village, he started to walk like normal.

However, there were two reasons why he had to run with everything he had

at the end of the story. The first reason being the bridge was washed away due to heavy rains the previous day. The second, and the more pressing reason was he was attacked by bandits. Although he was completely surrounded, he was able to defeat at least four of them and escape. I thought he was very strong. A normal person couldn't do that. Because Melos became very tired from that and fell asleep, however, he had to run to make it in time.

Melos had nothing valuable on him. Not only did he say from the start, "I have nothing with me save for my life," it was probably obvious just by looking at him. What were the bandits trying to achieve, then? They answered that question themselves. When Melos told them, "I have nothing with me save for my life," the bandits responded, "It's that very life we're after!" Essentially, they were less bandits, and more assassins. Weak assassins, granted. As for who ordered the assassination, Melos himself said, "In that case, the king must have demanded it," to which the assassins didn't respond. I thought it was very good of them to not betray their client.

The question is: was Melos correct in assuming it was the king who sent the assassins after him?

I don't think so. No matter who you might think wanted Melos dead, the king was the only person who it absolutely couldn't be.

King Dionys didn't have faith in anyone, so he didn't believe that Melos would return, at all. It was exactly because he thought it wouldn't happen that the shock in seeing Melos return caused such a change of heart in him. There's no way that someone who thought Melos wouldn't return would also send assassins to try and prevent that return.

Then who sent them? Who would've been happy to see the assassins succeed in killing Melos?

Let's try to imagine what would've happened had the assassination gone well. Without Melos arriving before sunset, Selinuntius would've been executed, and the king would have exclaimed with a sad expression, "This is exactly why people can't be trusted."

If Melos' corpse had been discovered after, it would get out that the king

executed a man even though the person who was supposed to arrive had been killed by highway robbers. While the king's subjects may have feared him, deep down, they would also chastise his decision. If Melos' body was carefully hidden and never found as a result, the king would continue to believe that Melos had run away according to his expectations. He would've lost his chance to believe in people and continued with the executions, further destroying the country from within.

Essentially, had Melos been assassinated, the country would've suffered regardless of what happened after. Thinking about it like this, the person who sent the assassins must have been someone who didn't want the king to reform himself against all odds through the arrival of Melos, thus earning the support of the people. When Melos did successfully return, I bet he was yelling on the inside.

On another note, when Melos was running back to the castle, he met a man named Philostratos who was Selinuntius' disciple. Even though Selinuntius hadn't actually been executed yet, he told Melos, "You're too late! Please stop running!" Philostratos didn't sound at all like he wanted to save Selinuntius. Wasn't he his disciple?

It's likely that he was sent by the same person who hired the assassins to at least try and talk Melos out of it before he ended up reaching the castle.

In the book, it was written that "King Dionys couldn't trust anyone." I think that distrust was founded. The king had enemies. However now, because of the incident with Melos, it would be even harder for him to figure out who those enemies were. In order to pit the king against his people, the person who targeted Melos would likely continue to go to whatever lengths necessary to prey on his distrust.

I was glad that King Dionys had a change of heart. However, after I finished reading "Run, Melos!" I thought that change may not last for such a long time.

I brought my palm to my forehead.

"Oreki..."

I had no clue he'd submitted a book report like this. I looked back at him and saw he was facing the other direction again. I can imagine how difficult it must've been to have something you wrote four years ago read next to you like that.

Fuku-chan, who had crept up next to me at some point, excitedly said, "The thing that gets me especially is that it represented Kaburaya Middle School in the contest and even got an award, albeit third place. Honestly speaking, when you're assigned a book report, I figured everyone just wrote what they thought the teacher would like the best, not what they actually thought. I've learned the error of my ways! This kind of thing is pretty good too!"

"I'm pretty sure it usually doesn't work out like that. Our Japanese language teacher in 7th grade was Mr. Hanashima, right? He was a little off," I responded.

I could still remember him pretty clearly. He was always really insistent in saying "There's no need to think about the author's intent."

I'm pretty sure he continued like this: "They were probably thinking something unsavory anyways. Even if they were thinking 'I just want to get drunk and fall asleep already' when they wrote their sentences, we can still examine those sentences for meaning. That's what language is. For example, Matsuo Basho wrote, 'The months and days are eternal travelers, and the years, coming and going, similar wayfarers.'[3] If we look at this passage honestly and without preconceptions, we can see that Basho considers the years not as something that simply passes, but as something that *comes and goes.* Essentially, this points to Basho being a time traveler."

...Yeah, he really was a strange teacher. If we were talking about Mr. Hanashima, I would have no trouble believing he'd submitted Oreki's.

"I wonder what happened to King Dionys after that. What do you think, Oreki-san?" asked Chi-chan, to which Oreki briefly responded, his cheeks somewhat flushed, "Who knows."

I flipped the pamphlet over and noticed something.

"Hey, Oreki. Your's was pretty long, wasn't it?"

"Hmm?"

Thrown off guard, he glanced over at me.
"The other ones are a bit shorter. Isn't yours at the max character limit?"

"Oh, that." A small, uneasy smile formed on Oreki's sullen face. "I thought it said the report had to be more than five pages, so I did exactly five. It turned out that it was actually *no* more than five pages. It sucks that, even though I tried my best to only do the bare minimum, I actually did more than I needed to. I was thinking about cutting out some parts after."

"Cutting out stuff after finishing it doesn't really sound like doing 'the bare minimum,'" I said, resigned.

Satoshi nodded deeply. "I can understand where you're coming from, though. If it were me, I might've cut out some stuff too."

Not cutting corners in order to cut corners? That makes sense to you? This question showed in my expression as I turned to ask Chi-chan, but she looked equally clueless. Her reaction only made sense. How would anyone have any idea what they were talking about?

Our boys were both all kinds of strange. We exchanged glances and giggled.

Well then... I looked at my watch and then got up from my chair. I couldn't spend too much time here.

"You going home, Mayaka?" asked Satoshi.

"No, I have to go to the Manga Society. I haven't really gone much recently."

As I said this, I noticed Fuku-chan's expression seemed to darken a bit. I nodded once, doing my best to show him I'd be alright, and picked up my bag.

Ever since last year's culture festival, the Kamiyama High School Manga Research Society has been in a state of disrepair.

Thanks to an assortment of incidents all happening around the time of the culture festival, the two factions in the club—those who wanted to try their hands (experienced or not) at drawing manga and those who didn't, instead only wanting to read—began to view each other as enemies. I thought it was pretty simple honestly; if you want to draw manga, then draw it, and if you only want to read, do just that. At this point, though, neither side cared about manga anymore. There was no end in sight.

I was partially to blame. Before, the reading faction was much, much larger, and the drawing faction had no choice but to wait in the shadows. During the culture festival, however, a girl from the reading faction spilled dirty water on me, a member of the drawing faction, and that caused the rest of the drawing faction to come out of the woodwork and get angry at the other side, saying they took things too far. Sure, the girl may have disliked me, but I personally think that it was just an accident. Of course, at that point, what I thought didn't matter at all.

As the new term rolled around and the new student recruitment period also ended, something happened that affected the situation between the two factions. Kouchi-senpai, the actual leader of the reading faction—despite the fact that she drew wonderful manga herself without letting the others know—quit the club earlier than the other seniors normally would. The drawing faction took this as a sign of victory at first, but it quickly became clear that Kouchi-senpai's presence was something like a dam; nothing good came about with her being gone. Back when she was still around, there were lots of times when the factions would say mean things indirectly about each other or only suggest their insults, but now, as we entered the month of May, club members hurling spiteful phrases at the other side became a familiar scene. I'd even be fine with this so long as it was still an argument stemming from a discussion about manga itself, but it only ever started with someone saying something like "you're so annoying" or "stop being so stuck-up."

In the first prep room, the one used by the Manga Society, the reading faction grouped up near the front while the drawing faction gathered at the back. Since there was a door at each side of the room, these were also split

up between the factions. I knew everyone saw me as the representative of the drawing faction, but it was all just so ridiculous that I ended up using whichever door was closer. I guess that also came off as me trying to provoke the other side.

That Monday after school, I sat down in my usual seat next to the window and started to jot down some ideas in my notebook for my next manga. Recently, I've only been writing stories that take place in modern Japan, so it probably wasn't a bad idea to switch it up and think of something I don't normally experience. Keeping that in mind, I wrote down some random words as they popped up into my head—things like "steam computer," "big clock (really big)," "automatic egg cooker used by the entire city," and so on. A shadow suddenly appeared over the page, so I looked up and found myself face-to-face with a sophomore, Asanuma-san, standing before me.

"You have a sec?"

I wasn't shy about the fact that I'm planning a new manga considering I was in the Manga Society clubroom, but I closed the notebook out of habit anyways.

"Sure. What is it?"

"So, here's the thing. There's something I wanted to talk with you about." Her voice was a bit hushed.

Asanuma-san had a slim face and narrow eyes, and her voice was a little high-pitched. She also drew manga, probably for a long time now since her strokes were quick and confident like she was really used to it. I got pretty jealous sometimes, because I was so slow in comparison, but on the other hand, part of me imagined the manga itself would probably be happier if she took a little more care with it.

Although I butted heads with Kouchi-senpai during the culture festival, Asanuma-san was the one who took the drawing faction's reins afterward. If I had to guess, it was probably because she wanted to change the Manga Society—a place where even picking up a pen would attract a bunch of cold stares—into an environment where eventually anyone would be able to draw manga to their heart's content. It was something I could never do,

since I always tried to avoid dealing with people like that and preferred to create manga by my own rules, so I couldn't help but be impressed by her resolve.

Asanuma-san got straight to the point. "I'm going to self-publish a manga. I wanted to ask you for your help."

I instantly looked around to see if anyone was nearby, but it looked like no one was paying attention. The idea hadn't even occurred to me. Sure, I'd self-published my own manga before, but I had never once paired up with Asanuma-san in the past.

"A manga... what kind?"

Asanuma-san furtively looked around the preparation room like I had and then responded in a bitter tone. "At this rate, we're going to end up only having opinion pieces again for this year's culture festival too. Joining the Manga Society and not being able to write manga is completely stupid, any way you look at it. We might as well just make one ourselves at this point. Don't you think so too?"

"Do you mean creating a separate club?"

She shook her head. "That's not it. There'd be no point in doing that... I'm saying we write a volume in secret, using the Kamiyama High School Manga Society label, and then sell it over summer break. With that, we could show that it's possible to write manga in the— Actually, scratch that. We'll show how the club is essentially meant for creating manga."

I couldn't shake off the feeling that she was saying something dangerous. If she were to use this surprise attack to force her opinion on the club, leveraging it into an advantage for the drawing faction, wouldn't that basically be a coup d'état? Although it's true that this club's sad condition went on 24/7. It had never crossed my mind that simply drawing your own manga could be used as an attack against the reading faction. Thinking about it some more, I guess I could understand how the act of creating a manga alone would look like I was trying to make some kind of point in the current Manga Society... Who am I kidding? "I guess I could understand" is the understatement of the century. It's obvious it'd look like that. Maybe I

was being too naive up to this point.

"Who else is going to be in on it?" I asked. She listed some names, folding a finger for every one she mentioned.

"Me, Tai, Nichiyama, Harigaya, and then there’s you. I haven't asked the others yet, though."

All of them were in the drawing faction, certainly enough, but as far as I was aware, Asanuma-san was the only one who had actually drawn anything substantial. Tai was a new student, so I didn't know much about her, but I remember her saying she hadn't drawn manga before and she wanted to practice it in the Manga Society. Nishiyama-san and Harigaya-san were both sophomores, and I was pretty sure neither of them had drawn anything outside a panel or two.

"Will they really be able to write something long?" I asked. Asanuma-san lightly chuckled.

"I doubt it, but we don't have to make it that long. Four or five pages are enough. You know, even a two-page spread is fine. The important thing is that we get as many people as we can involved."

It was pretty rude to assume Nishiyama-san and Harigaya-san couldn't draw just because they made next to nothing for the club. I really wanted the answer to be that they would be able to do it. What Asanuma-san said to me showed that she didn't care whether or not they could. Though, to someone who was only thinking about the results, I guess it wasn't that surprising...

Asanuma-san's voice took on a softer tone, maybe noticing how uncomfortable I was getting.

"I'm not going to ask you to do everything yourself. The topic's already decided, so just throw together whatever you can."

Although it might've been too early for an amateur like me to take pride in my work, I wanted to tell her that my manga wasn't something I just "threw together" like that. For someone like Asanuma-san, who I'm sure understood this, to say it like that, I guess it went to show how desperate

she was.

I figured I'd at least ask.

"What's the topic?"

"It's going to be be: 'Manga Society.'"

I couldn't help but groan a little. Asanuma-san started to speak more strongly.

"If we don't do something like that, then we won't be able to release the manga. I won't lie and say what we're doing doesn't have any immediate use, but if we graduate before we can take the chance to represent the Kamiyama High School Manga Society name and communicate that to people, then we'll never get another chance. I can't stand thinking about that. Don't you feel the same way, Ibara?"

I didn't really feel up for representing the club's legacy or whatever, but if I was able to get even one or two people to read my work... then I guess I would be happy.

"So? How about it?"

My heart was drawn in two directions. I really didn't like the thought of my manga becoming a tool in the club's faction warfare, but it did boil down to me simply wanting to draw manga and have it be read by others. If I had to say it, I might not even care about the circumstances leading up to it as long as it was read in the end.

Possibly seeing a glimmer of hope in my hesitation, Asanuma-san continued in a more relaxed tone. "If you do accept, tell me how many pages you'll draw beforehand."

"Huh? You want me to decide on the number of pages before I tell you my answer?"

I wasn't expecting that. I didn't have much experience teaming up with others, but it was much more common for groups to first decide on the number of participating members before they decided on a page count, and

sometimes they didn't even bother going to the trouble of establishing a page count in the first place. It was the first time, for me at least, to hear about a group that wanted to decide on the number of pages first and foremost.

"Yeah. I need to get an estimate for the club expense form, after all."

"Club expenses? Aren't we going to pay for it ourselves?"

"There'd be no point if we paid out-of-pocket. I'll go talk with the general committee about it and get what we need from the club's budget, even if push comes to shove. I'll need accurate numbers at that point, right?"

Was it really okay to do that, though? The club budget was for the entire club, so everyone—or at the very least, the president, Yuasa-senpai—would have to be on board, or else we'd be basically embezzling the funds. I don't even think the general committee was the group responsible for club fund distribution in the first place.

"You're going to talk to the president, of course. Right?"

Yuasa-senpai had almost nothing to do with any of the antagonism happening in the Manga Research Society, instead flawlessly taking care of the mundane tasks required in running the club, like filling out the club recruitment and expenses forms. Not only did Asanuma-san's plan feel unstable at best, but it'd be a good idea if the president was also involved so we won't make the club's situation even worse.

"Yeah... I guess. I guess I have to tell her," she murmured dissatisfied, her mouth almost completely shut.

This whole thing was a bit scary, but I'll just leave it to her. I had to start thinking about my own manga.

"Yeah, I can't really decide right away on the page number. I'm happy for the opportunity, but I don't know where to go with the topic 'Manga Society' let alone how many pages it would end up being. I'll start by making a rough draft and then use that as the basis for the page count, so would you mind waiting?"

A small frown formed on her lips. "Well, that makes sense, I suppose. How long do you need?"

Today was the 14th, and I still needed to brainstorm some ideas and formulate the plot. If I only needed to gauge the page count, then the rough draft didn't have to be very detailed, which meant...

"Friday, maybe?"

"Got it. Until then, I'll be searching for more girls who're willing to draw." She then made sure to add, "Keep this between us, yeah?"

3.

My parents didn't say much to me about my drawing manga. They were neither disapproving nor supportive of it; as long as I studied hard, they gave me the leeway to do whatever I wanted in my free time. The "as long as I studied hard" part implied that I was free to draw manga only on weekends and holidays. My mom and dad always looked a little worried when they saw me drawing manga on the weekdays, so I stopped doing it. I of course had other plans as well on my days-off, so I often ended up being really pressed for time.

Asanuma-san told me about her plans on Monday, and I needed to get back to her on my decision by Friday. Although it was true I hadn't drawn anything yet, I didn't want to break the unspoken promise with my parents to not draw anything at home on the weekdays, so I decided to work on it at school.

The problem was where. I had to keep Asanuma's scheme a secret, so there was no way I could do anything related to it in the Manga Society clubroom. I wish I could've used the earth sciences lecture room—where the Classics Club met—but I didn't want to drag them into the utter mess that was the Manga Society's problems. I was similarly uncomfortable with using the library room as a member of its staff for something completely unrelated, so with all of those crossed off the list, I had only one more option. I decided to open my notebook in my homeroom, Class 2-C.

I can't speak for others, but at least personally, it's really difficult for me to draw manga with people around. Especially doing so at school, surrounded by classmates, was out of the question. All I was doing at this point was jotting down ideas, so it couldn't have looked like I was doing anything more than studying hard from the side. To add to that, I even had a textbook open to further camouflage my manga brainstorming. It was a disguise so perfect that not even God or Oreki would be able to see through it.

After school on Tuesday, I sat up straight at my desk in classroom 2-C, opened my world history textbook, and started to write down some ideas.

This was my first time ever using a theme from someone else, so I guess I was a bit unsure about what I was doing, but I'm confident it wasn't impossible. While Asanuma-san did say the theme was "the Manga Society," she never specified that it had to take place in Kamiyama High School's Manga Research Society. A group that researches manga... I see. How about a story set in the future? In a world where civilization has collapsed, a group of people come across the ruins of a Manga Research Society and try to figure out what exactly it was. Would that be too convoluted?

I scribbled down ideas like these into my notebook with a mechanical pencil, but my thoughts started to get scattered and I found myself unable to concentrate, the reason being a couple of girls still in the classroom. One of them was Maki Hani, a girl with a name that rolled off the tongue so well that it made me always want to say the entire thing when I called out to her. She looked mellow, despite her bold cosplay choices during the culture festival, and she seemed pretty smart. To top it all off, she was a member of the Manga Society. At the moment, she was happily chatting away with some other girls about their summer vacations.

I usually don't really try to learn every little detail involving the club conflict, but I could tell just by watching that Hani-san was technically with the so-called reading faction. That said, it was pretty clear that she never actively supported them, and when the two sides started to insult each other, she always stayed quiet, even though she sat with the reading faction. It could be that she was like me, and got wrapped up in one of the sides while thinking the whole thing was stupid at the same time. I never talked with her in the clubroom, but our conversations in class were pretty normal.

I was pretty sure Hani-san wouldn't tell anyone anything, even if she did somehow find out about Asanuma-san's plan, but she might be able to figure out I was outlining the plot to a manga by looking at my notes. That would be more embarrassing than anything, so I stayed in constant alert.

I might've just been paranoid, but who was to say for certain? I labored over my notes, constantly writing and rewriting, and then suddenly looked up. Hani-san was facing away from me, talking as carefree as she had been

when I'd started.

"What, no way! Our baseball team totally sucks."

Hearing her say this, among other things, meant that she was at least participating in the conversation, I guess, but then why couldn't I shake the feeling that someone was watching me? Even if she did somehow figure out that I was putting together the plot to a manga, what was the point in watching from a distance?

...Though, there was something about Hani-san that bugged me.

She was on really good terms with Kouchi-senpai, who had quit the club. It wasn't the typical senior-junior relationship you'd see in most clubs. I'd noticed them talking really naturally, like they were old friends, tons of times before. Kouchi-senpai was really popular with the other girls as well, so their relationship was a pretty common topic. From the bits that I picked up on, it looked like the two of them lived close by, and they played together a lot as kids. Maybe she was observing me, the possible instigator of a drawing faction coup d'état, as a friend of the reading faction's leader? Well, I guess I couldn't rule out the possibility completely, but it really did sound like something straight out of a manga. But if that wasn't the case, then I really was at a loss. Why would she be watching me?

As these thoughts crossed my mind, Hani-san looked at her cellphone and then stood right up to leave the classroom. I guess it really was in my head after all, I thought, embarrassed.

The next day, however, Hani-san stayed again in the classroom after school ended, and just as I started to wonder about it, she began to look at me. The only ones in the classrooms were three boys talking about soccer, Hani-san, and I, and I concentrated on my notes as she silently read a book. It was getting tough, but I had to finish the rough draft quickly or else I wouldn't make the deadline.

It might be a little different from how others do it, but when I draw manga, I write the dialogue first. I end up having to do it first in order to get a good

feel for how everyone talks and what they would say in each situation. I'm not really sure if this way is efficient—actually, I usually have to shorten the lines when I try to put them in the speech bubbles for the first time, so it's probably safe to say it isn't... There's really nothing that can be done about that, though. Drawing the rough draft at school would be way too embarrassing if I added the dialogue at that point, so I had to resort to desperate measures.

I wrote the first line of the dialogue I had carefully thought about over the past two days into my notes. I wasn't too thrilled about the chosen theme, but as I wrote more and more, the story started to move surprisingly well.

I thought back to the criticism I got in *La Shin*. A professional manga author participates in the selection process for the New World Prize and even writes short comments for the winners of the participation awards and up. The one who did it this time was Yutaka Niiro, and his comments to me were this:

"Great point: climax pacing. Okay point: art. (You can do it!) Bad point: the lines were too long. You're getting better and better, so good luck on your next submission!"

I'd never actually heard of Niiro when I first read his comments, but the day after I did, I used up all of my spending money to go out and buy tons of his volumes. Even before he mentioned it, I knew vaguely that long lines were my Achilles heel, so I took painstaking care to figure out what words I should cut and which ones were effective as I filled up the notebook.

As I was completely engrossed in this, a voice suddenly called out to me.

"Maya-cchi"

It was Hani-san. I looked up and noticed that the boys had disappeared at some point, leaving her and I the only people left in the room. She wasn't looking at me, but down at the phone in her hand. I responded, nonchalantly closing the notebook.

"What's wrong?"

She looked up and faced me, not a trace of emotion in her expression.

"They found out about Asanuma's plan."

There was no reason to play dumb, and it wasn't really that surprising either. Asanuma-san said it was a secret, but it looked like she was going to ask anyone who looked promising to help with the project, so I figured it was just a matter of time before the truth got out. With this in mind, I guess Hani-san really was observing me after all.

"I see."

With us being exposed, there was probably no way we could continue drawing the manga using our club's budget. Even from the get-go, however, there was a problem with our plan of talking to the club president to get our funds that way. Releasing the manga by pooling together money from the people involved was probably a more clear-headed approach, and it might've been a good idea to stick with that from the start.

Hani-san sighed with a look of resignation as she watched me.

"Maya-cchi, you're a little calm, don't you think? It's looking like it'll get pretty nasty."

I glanced down at the phone in her hands. I'm guessing someone sent her some kind of message. Something nasty... I had an idea of what she was talking about.

"Did something happen in the Manga Society?"

She nodded, and her face turned into an exhausted grimace.

"It looks like they're giving Asanuma a lot of hell. Well, it's pretty obvious they would..."

When she said "obvious," was she talking about that being the obvious result for someone who tried to do something so shady behind everyone's backs, or was she sympathetic of Asanuna's determination even though she knew the reading faction would definitely get angry? I had no way of

knowing. I didn't even know where I stood on the issue.

"Yeah, I guess," I agreed as I started to put away the notebook on top of my desk. Hani-san looked a little shocked.

"You're going? You'd be better off if you stayed clear..."

I was happy to see Hani-san that worried about me, considering we didn't really talk much, but you know... What can you do?

"It's not like I decided to help her with her book yet, but I can't bring myself to ignore it either."

Hani-san chuckled slightly and responded, "Gotcha. Sorry, but I'm going to go with you."
The fact that Hani-san, member of the reading faction, was going meant that she didn't want me to add myself to the side under fire and upset the current balance. She probably said sorry with this in mind.

"Maya-cchi, let's give each other our phone numbers. If anything happens, I'll send you a message."

I nodded and pulled my phone from my bag.

The Manga Society clubroom was on the second floor of the main building, in the first prep room, and my 2-C classroom was in the same building on the third floor. The walk wasn't very long, but to tell the truth, I took my time in getting there. Was it even possible for me to hurry to a place where I knew I'd be yelled at? Hani-san followed right behind me in that state.

We finally arrived at the clubroom, and as I slid open the sliding door, I started to regret not running. It became clear with a single glance that everything had already ended. Asanuma-san, Harigaya-san, and Tai were all surrounded by a crowd of girls in a semicircle around them. Tai was sobbing pitifully and Asanuma-san stared at her feet, silently taking it all. Directly in front of the three was the sophomore, Shinohara-san. Her arms were crossed, and as I entered the room, she looked at me and sneered.

"Ibara, huh? Were you waiting for us to finish up before you came? Pretty sneaky, aren't you."

"That's not it. I didn't know about it is all."

"Sure you didn't," she jeered, and then proudly turned to point at the three silent girls in front of her. "Then I'll spell it out for you because you're so late. We know everything. You were planning on stealing our club funds to make your book, and then you were going to chase out everyone who couldn't draw manga. Seriously, how dirty can you get?"

After Kouchi-senpai left the club, Shinohara-san was the one who stepped up more or less to be the reading faction's leader. That might've been how she saw the plan, but she was going way overboard.

"You're completely wrong. Asanuma-san just wanted to create a manga without the Manga Society giving her a hard time. She said she was going to get permission to use the club funds from the president, Yuasa-senpai. Please don't call it stealing."

"The president?" Shinohara-san muttered and a huge smile grew across her face. "She already left the club. Needed to concentrate on her college exams, apparently. Didn't you hear?"

"What...?"

I looked around, scanning the clubroom for Yuasa-senpai's presence. She was nowhere to be seen. Not only her, but all of the seniors were missing.

"So that's what it was," I quietly said to nobody but myself.

Just as Asanuma-san was planning on taking the initiative by creating this manga, Shinohara-san and the others were set on getting the neutral Yuasa-senpai to quit the club, leaving the position of president open for them to fill. It was reaching the time of year when most seniors quit their clubs, so there was nothing strange about it happening now. Sometime yesterday or today, without a doubt, the president had stepped down without me realizing it. Look at me, getting all worried about whether or not I'd draw

manga in the Manga Society while this was going on... What the heck was I doing?!

Seeing my expression grow conflicted, Shinohara-san continued without a second thought. "What do you even mean 'giving her a hard time' anyways? You might as well be describing yourself at that point. You act all high and mighty, laughing at people who can't draw manga but want to join the club, and then get such a victim complex when we ask you to not do stuff like that on your own. Cut the crap. We just want to enjoy what we think is fun. Just by saying we like manga, our parents and teachers treat us like we're idiots, so why do we have to go through the same crap in our club, too?!"

The club members surrounding Asanuma-san all had their eyes fixated on me by this point. All of their gazes were so cold and bitter. In the silence that followed, I could tell that they all agreed with Shinohara-san's words, resenting both Asanuma-san and I.

I hadn't ever treated them like idiots. All I wanted was to draw manga. Sure, it's not like I ever apologized for being able to, but I never once looked down on those who couldn't.

—Was that really true?

Was it possible that, without realizing it, some nasty part of me surfaced and did something to them—like a strongly worded sentence or annoyed attitude?

No, get a grip. I've never thought anything like that. Being able to draw manga is just another talent. It's no different than being able to swing around on a high bar or remembering all the periods in Japan's history. It might be important to the person herself, but I've always thought that bragging about something like that to others was completely dumb. You can't be doubting yourself, Mayaka.

I had to stop myself from getting worked up by those cold stares. For now, I needed to take things slowly and figure out what was going to happen.

"So? Who's the new president?"

Shinohara's eyes opened wide in surprise. "You don't know?"

I guess that response meant it was someone I knew. There's no way it'd be Asanuma-san, right? Shinohara-san raised her arm and pointed at me.

"Me?"

"Yeah right. Behind you."

I turned around.

Standing there was my classmate, a girl who looked timid despite not being so, who had entered the clubroom after me. It was Hani-san. She held up a hand in slight apology as I stood there dumbfounded.

"Sorry, Maya-cchi. It wasn't easy to tell you." She then walked next to Shinohara-san and asked, "Did they accept?"

"All of it."

"Good. Tell Maya-cchi, then."

They were probably talking about something like the terms of surrender. With a calmer attitude than before, Shinohara-san started her explanation.

"We decided on it before you got here."

"We're not allowed to draw manga, I'm guessing," I said.

"If you want to do it, we won't stop you."

Taken aback by her response, I turned to Asanuma-san without thinking. However, her expression remained listless. It looked like there was more to her terms.

"The manga in question is probably going to fall flat anyways. Although you guys think you're all that, Ibara's the only one who's even made anything in the first place. Do whatever you want, though. How about we even help you fill out the club expense form too? If you can't manage to finish it in the end, we'll all have a good laugh at you. You'll also have to

take responsibility for wasting the club's budget and quit."

She then retracted her index finger and placed her palm on her chest.

"In the one-in-a-million chance you do make something worthwhile... well then, good for you! We'll let you guys do whatever you want with the club. We'll make our own club so we can do what we want as well."

So that's what it was. The time finally came.
I'd had the feeling for some time now, but it looked like the rift between the two factions had already become too deep to repair. By taking out money to make her manga, the club would be split into two.

Hani-san clapped her hands together to bring me out of my daze.

"I'm sure you understand where this is going, Maya-cchi. Sorry about all this. Let's do what we have to, now."

Shinohara-san brought out a piece of paper and waved it in front of Asanuma-san.

"As for the club expense form, we've actually already filled one out. We've even got our signature down and talked with the club adviser. It's up to you to write the amount and purpose, Asanuma-san."

Hearing her name, Asanuma-san finally looked up and stared wearily at the form, but in the end, she shook her head slowly.

"I don't know how much it'll cost. We haven't even decided on the page count..."

"Oh, come on! Don't worry about that! If it's not enough, we'll just submit another one. Let's go for 10,000 yen. Starting is the most important part!" Hani-san replied.

As if being lured in by her cheery voice, Asanuma-san shakily approached the two of them and took the form. Shinohara-san even had a pen at the ready, and she handed it over as well. Asanuma-san looked at the pen cautiously, but just as she was about to start writing, her entire body froze

up as if being held back by something.

"What's wrong? Too scared?" provoked Shinohara-san, and I felt like I could see something like a flash of anger run through Asanuma-san's eyes and she immediately started to write.

I only watched as this happened, unable to come to my senses. I knew something was off about all this, but I couldn't think straight at all. Maybe too much had happened for me to process. Finally, a single question started to take form in my consciousness: why was Hani-san in such a hurry to fill out the club expense form? What would change if we filled it out? We'd be able to work on our manga? No, that wasn't the issue...

What was Shinohara-san saying earlier? I desperately racked my head, mind full of muddled thoughts, for the words. I'm pretty sure it went something like this.

—We're going to have you take responsibility for the funds you wasted and make you leave the club.

"Wait!"

I quickly blurted that out to stop Asanuma-san, but she'd already finished filling out the form like she'd been asked by that point. She turned around, flustered, when she heard me say that, but Hani-san immediately pulled the form out from under her palm.

There was only one way to prevent the Manga Society from splitting into two. We would have to give up on our plans to create the manga, still in its developmental stages, and promise the others we wouldn't go off on our own to do something like this in the future, making up with them in the process. Now that there was a club expense form involved, however, we wouldn't be able to use the excuse that the manga wasn't even started yet. Even if we didn't touch a single yen, they could still accuse us of "wasting club funds" and prevent reconciliation.

I've never genuinely hated the reading faction. I mean, I didn't even really consider myself a proper member of the drawing faction, after all. Yet, their tactics this time around were just so cruel. If they wanted to split the club

from the start, they should've just quietly left themselves or even told Asanuma-san and I to quit outright. And yet, they were doing all this to purposely try and humiliate us as much as possible. I glared at Hani-san, but she was no longer facing my direction. She carefully placed the form in her bag and left the room with a simple, "Alright then, good luck with everything, okay? I'm going to get the teacher's signature now."

If I were to chase after her right now, slap her across the cheek, and grab the form from her bag, would I be able save the club then?

...It would only make things worse, I guess. In the freshly silent classroom, all I could hear were the silent sobs of the freshman, Tai, until she finally started to speak, forgetting who was around her.

"I'm so sorry, senpai. I'm so sorry!"

4.

Why did I draw manga in the first place, again?

After school on Wednesday, even though Asanuma-san was cornered by Shinohara-san and the others and looked almost lifeless, when I asked her if she wanted to abandon the project, she responded with a clear "No."

"If we finish the manga, Shinohara-san will quit. That's okay with you?"

There was no point in asking her that. If we didn't finish it, we'd be the ones forced to quit instead. It was a lose-lose situation. As she listened, Asanuma-san started to smile stiffly, and she responded, "Sounds perfect to me. If she's willing to kick us out, then I'm fine with returning the favor."

I didn't draw manga to kick Shinohara-san out of the Manga Society. Though, if you did ask me why I did it, I wouldn't be able to give a good answer.

It's so strange. Up until yesterday, I thought I knew why.

Even then, the preparations for the manga continued as planned.

The story was all but finished, and for the most part, the dialogue was complete as well, and yet no matter how many times I looked it over, I couldn't be satisfied by what I had. I got a weird sense of déjà vu from it—probably because the story was basically about me—but I feel like I didn't enjoy the process of creating it. Of course, if I refused to draw the manga until I perfected the ultimate story, then I'd probably be at this for another ten years. My only option was to play the cards dealt to me.

I started the manga's rough draft on Thursday after school. Though the budget was pretty much decided already, you couldn't really make a book with only 10,000 yen, so the original plan to settle the page count ahead of time didn't change. More accurately, Asanuma-san hated the idea of changing her original plan to match the situation forced onto her by Hani-san. Also, I honestly wasn't even sure if I'd be able to write something good

enough to publish in Asanuma-san's book until I made the rough draft.

Though it was a little messy, the preparations for the rough draft included splitting the pages into panels and then adding speech bubbles before I started to draw the images. Now that I was at this step, both my classroom and the library were out of the question, and I didn't want to worry my parents by doing it at home, either. Drawing it in the Manga Society clubroom would almost definitely be seen as me challenging the reading faction, so the only option left to me was the Classics Club's earth sciences lecture room. I really wanted to leave the Classics Club out of the Manga Society's drama as much as I could, but, well, it wasn't like it was the first time I used the lecture room to draw manga.

Fuku-chan was the only one who showed up this time. Normally I'd be over the moon at this, but I had a mission today, and it looked like he was busy with his own work as well.

"Hey!"

"Hi."

This smiling exchange was all that really took place, and I sat at a desk a little far away and took out my notebook. Doing the rough draft on manga manuscript paper was normally the ideal option because it made doing the actual thing much easier, but because the paper itself was really bulky, difficult to carry around discreetly, and—above all—expensive, I settled on doing it in a normal notebook.

It was time to begin.

Almost as if each stroke was a prayer, I carefully started to draw the panels. *Please turn out interesting. I know I'm still an amateur, but I'm trying as hard as I can. So much of the manga I read before you was so very interesting. You should be able to become the same. Please...*

The seasons continued its slow transition from the spring into summer. A peaceful breeze wafted in from the wide-open window. The lines I drew without a ruler were straight, and the circles I drew without a compass were smooth. With the simple appearance of the story's cast, each one of them with only circular eyes the shape of a rain doll, I would now decide how

everything would unfold.

I did mess up a bit. Without thinking, I started the rough draft in the same notebook that contained the dialogue I planned earlier. I tend to do everything in one notebook, as I hate having to carry a bunch of them around school with me. It didn't affect me much at first, because I had a clear idea of how I wanted to start the story, but as I got to the third and fourth pages, I started needing to flip back and forth through the notebook more and more to check the dialogue. It really was becoming a hassle; I'll make sure I definitely split the drafting and planning into separate notebooks next time.

While my mistake did slow things down, I continued to make progress. Unfortunately, as I did, the sense of unease that I felt when Asanuma-san first gave me the vague "Manga Society" theme slowly grew larger and more tangible with every page. Yet, the thought that this story might be used to oust Shinohara-san from the club never crossed my mind. When I reach this point, I forget about everything aside from manga. It'd probably all come rushing back the second my hand stopped moving, though.

I continued to draw, flipped through my notes to check the dialogue and flipped even more to check the story, and then continued to draw some more—how long was I at this, I wonder. My hand stopped as I heard a slight vibration.

Someone had messaged me. I opened my bag and took a look at my phone. It was from Hani-san, surprisingly, and her message was only one short sentence:

Come as fast as you can.

If Hani-san sent it, then that meant something probably happened in the Manga Society clubroom, and she wanted me to come there. I had any number of ideas about what might've happened, and none of them sounded good. I couldn't stop imagining the possibility that a fight might've broken out and someone got hurt. I stood up immediately, making a loud sound as the seat slid back.

"Ah! You scared me!" I heard from across the room.

He wasn't the only one scared. I'd completely forgotten he was even here.

"I'm sorry, someone messaged me," I said flustered, as if it was a proper excuse. I quickly closed the notebook on top of my desk, and, thinking I was better safe than sorry, I added, "Watch this!"

As I did, he looked back at me with a confused expression. "You want me to look at it?"

As if!

"No, I mean look after it."

"Look after it?"

I guess that would be a confusing request to have thrown at you all of a sudden. My wording probably wasn't the greatest, but I didn't have any time to spare. I ran out of the earth sciences lecture room as fast as I could.

I quickly made it to the first prep room, but nothing was wrong.
The reading faction was sitting in the front of the classroom like usual, and the drawing faction was gathered in the back, everyone reading manga or talking with each other. There wasn't the greatest atmosphere, but it looked like nothing terrible had happened at least.

Shinohara-san was sitting at a desk in the center of the reading faction, laughing with her friends. Asanuma-san, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen. Maybe she still hadn't recovered from her experience yesterday, or maybe she had something to do—I don't know. The rest of the drawing faction didn't seem that depressed, so it probably wasn't likely that she'd gotten chased from the classroom or anything.

I had to find Hani-san first. After I scanned the room, though, I finally realized she wasn't there. Shinohara-san spotted me looking around and asked, 'Looking for someone?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Asanuma's not here."

One of the nearby sophomores snickered, "She's probably off crying somewhere," but Shinohara-san didn't turn around to acknowledge the comment. I was looking for Hani-san, but it might not be good if I said that right now. I'll just play along, I guess.

"I see. Thanks."

I turned around and heard giggling behind me. I wasn't certain, but it didn't sound like Shinohara-san had joined in.

If Hani-san wasn't in the clubroom, then the only other possibility I could think of was that she meant our Class 2-C homeroom. Both of us were in the same class, after all, so I guess I should've assumed it was that one first. Just to be safe, I sent her a text.

Accidentally went to the Manga Society. Where should I go?

I walked some ways away from the first prep room and waited a couple minutes for a response, but nothing came. I figured it'd be faster to just go there and check for myself, so I climbed the stairs and headed towards the room.

When I got there, however, I still couldn't find her. There were around five students in the room, some of them from other classes, but they were each sitting down at a desk. Some of the girls were talking near the entrance, so I asked them, "Hey, have you seen Hani-san?"

"Honey? We've been here for a while, and we haven't seen her."

I had no idea she was called Honey. I honestly don't think it fits her quiet appearance at all.

But anyways, something's not right. If she wasn't in the Manga Society or our classroom, then I had no idea where she wanted me to go. I work in the library, so that's a possibility, but I really doubt it.

"You looking for Honey?"

"Not really. She called for me."

"To come here?"

"I don't really know. It's okay, I'll look somewhere else. Thanks."

I left the classroom and looked down at my cellphone. Still nothing. I was really curious about what happened, but if I can't get ahold of her, then there's probably nothing else I can do. I should've gotten her number.[2. Cellphones in Japan use a phone address for sending messages, rather than the phone number.]

"Might as well work on my rough draft, I guess."

I walked to the Classics Club room, completely at a loss.

Back in the earth sciences lecture room, I let out a small scream.

"Where's my notebook?!"

The book that I'd left sitting on top of my desk was missing. That's completely ridiculous! Where could it have gone?!

Fuku-chan was still sitting at his desk, facing his work, but he dropped the mechanical pencil he was holding when he heard my voice.

"You... you scared me. What's wrong now?"

Before I left, I asked Fuku-chan to look after my notebook, but my wording wasn't perfect. He mistook my request for me giving him permission to look at my notes. I'm pretty sure I corrected myself, but there might've still been a misunderstanding.

"Hey, Fuku-chan. Do you have the notebook I left here?"

"Nope, I don't."

"Then where is it? This is weird."

As I started to rummage through my bag, he started to talk with a bit of

worry. "Um... were you by chance not the one that asked for that notebook?"

The blood drained from me. I raised my head, defeated. There wasn't a single thing in his expression that showed he was joking.

"I wasn't."

"...Oh." He lowered his head suddenly. "It's my fault. A girl came here and took the notebook, telling me you asked her to get it for you. You even told me to look after it, and I still didn't question her."

So someone stole it?

"When was that?"

"I was working on this stuff, so I'm not really sure... I'm pretty sure it wasn't too long after you left."

"Who would do something like that?!"

"I didn't get the best look at her, but it was someone I didn't know. She came in a rush and asked me if your notes were here."

It was Hani-san. There was no doubt. She sent me a message to lure me out and then took it while I was away. It didn't even cross my mind that she might go after my notebook, so I carelessly left it an easy target.

"It was a quiet-looking girl. I figured something must've happened, so I pointed at your desk. I was such an idiot."

It wasn't his fault... No one could've predicted this would happen. There was the time when my chocolate was stolen, but we figured out who did it and why pretty quickly, so it wasn't a huge shock. He also made up for it after. This time was different, though. I strongly shook my head.

"It's not your fault, Fuku-chan. In fact, I'm thankful you were here, because now I know who took it. Sorry for yelling when I came in."

I pulled out the chair next to me and sat down unsteadily.

Hani-san was in the reading faction, so we were on different sides in the Manga Society, but we'd always talk normally in class. It's not like I trusted her or anything—the word "trust" is too strong to describe our relationship. She didn't even tell me that she was chosen to be the next club president, so she probably felt the same way. And yet, she did something like this.

In order to get me out of the room, she needed my phone mail address. I gave it to her yesterday, after she told me what was happening in the Manga Society clubroom and suggested we exchange contact information. So basically, what if she'd been watching me and planning ever since then on how to get my notebook?

Why, though?
Why did she have to steal my notebook?

I can only think of one reason.

Hani-san wants to sabotage Asanuma-san's manga. She laid a trap for me and tricked Fuku-chan, all because she didn't want me to finish it!

All of it spun around in my head—the pointless conflict between the reading and drawing factions, the weaponized manga, the club president coup d'état, and now this theft. Why? Why did everything turn out this way? Why was I dragged into the middle of it all? Losing the notebook itself wasn't all that bad; I could just rewrite everything. The thing that hurt the most was that Hani-san stole it. It's not like I trusted her. We weren't really that close. But the lies!

"Mayaka. Mayaka!"

I snapped back to my senses. Fuku-chan was bent over my desk, staring at me.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I wanted to cry. I wanted to bawl my eyes out and have him comfort me, but it was too soon to give up.

I took in a deep breath and slowly let it back out. My feverish mind tried to convince itself this was all just some kind of lie, dream, or misunderstanding, but unfortunately, I knew that wasn't the case.

"It looks like that notebook was really important to you," Fuku-chan said with a serious expression.

"The notebook itself isn't really... I was drawing manga in there, so it's just that I didn't want anyone else to see it."

"She stole a manga?"

I shook my head. It wasn't a manga that was stolen. It was only the lines, story points, and part of the rough draft—but how do I explain that to him?

As I stayed silent, Fuku-chan pulled back and placed a hand on the desk. "I'll go get it back. Do you have any idea who she is?"

"I'm positive she's someone I know, but... it's okay."

"I won't go saying it's my responsibility anymore, but it really bugs me, and I can't let it slide. Who is it?"

I shook my head softly. "It's not your fault, and things might get bad if the others find out... I don't want to get you involved in all this."

I really shouldn't have worked on the manga in the earth sciences lecture room. Just look at what became of it. As I stared at the floor, he finally said, "Mayaka... I want to be involved, though."

"I know..."

Fuku-chan stared intently off into space but finally said, "I know I might not be a lot of help, but please tell me what's going on. I understand it won't be good if I confront her now, but let both of us try and figure out another way to get it back for you."

I probably had a bit of a sad smile then.

"You really do feel responsible, don't you?"

"Yeah, guess so. Even though I was fully aware of how messy things were in the Manga Society, I still let myself get duped like that."

I never really intended on telling him about the current state of the Manga Society. I just didn't want him to worry. Funnily enough, though, now that I pretty much had to tell him everything, I felt strangely at peace.

5.

With that, I told him the gist of what had happened up until now. About how Asanuma-san asked me to join her project last Monday. About how her manga was going to be used as a tool in the Manga Society's faction warfare. About how I, in order to figure out the page count, asked for some time to figure things out.

I told him about how, on Tuesday, I felt like Hani-san was keeping an eye on me while I worked in my notebook in the classroom.

About how, on Wednesday, I learned that Asanuma-san's plan was discovered. About how Hani-san had become the club president before I even realized what was happening.

And now today, about how I left the classroom because of Hani-san's message, leading to my notebook being stolen while I was away.

After I finished speaking, Fuku-chan stayed silent, deep in thought. Even I was trying to put everything into order in my head as I told him what had happened. Finally, he smiled bitterly and said, "I guess you were followed, huh."

I think so too. Up until yesterday, I was preparing the manga in classroom 2-C, and yet, even though I switched to the earth sciences lecture room today, how was she able to pinpoint me here? The only thing I could think of was that she had followed me.

"If I continued to work on it in the classroom, this probably wouldn't have happened."

"I'm not so sure about that," Fuku-chan said, his arms crossed. He mulled it over in his head for a bit and then continued, "You said that on Wednesday, too, you were following what Hani-san said, right?"

"Yeah. She told me that Asanuma-san was getting cornered by the others, so I went to the Manga Society. She was telling the truth then."

"At that time, I'm guessing you left your notebook out in the classroom,

right?"

Did I? I tried to think back.

Although I hadn't drawn anything yet, I wouldn't leave my notebook with the manga's story in it out on my desk like that. I'm pretty sure I remember putting it in my bag. After that, I probably took the bag with me to the clubroom.

Wait, no. I'd planned on coming back to the classroom, so that's not what happened.

"I put the notebook in my bag, but I left my bag in the classroom."

"That means she had the chance to steal it yesterday, then."

I see. That hadn't occurred to be, but he was exactly right. Not only that, but we were the only two in the classroom at the time. All she had to do was wait a little bit after I left for the Manga Society, and stealing my notebook would be a piece of cake.

Before realizing it, I muttered under my breath, "Then why..."

Fuku-chan nodded deeply. "That's exactly it. 'Why.' Why did she have to steal your notebook today?"

"To sabotage Asanuma-san's manga, right? Why else would she do it?" I responded, a little spitefully.

Fuku-chan, however, shook his head. "I'm not so sure about that. I started to think about something while you were telling me that story. Doesn't it seem similar to Houtarou's thing a bit ago?" he said quietly.

Oreki's?

What does he mean by 'a bit ago?'

Fuku-chan and Chi-chan... that's right, we were reading Oreki's book report. That was pretty fun. It feels like it was already so long ago. If I remember correctly, it was done on "Run, Melos," and it was about who was trying to

stop Melos from reaching the city. I had no idea what about it was similar to my situation, though.

"What's the same, exactly?" I asked.

"The part about Dionysus and the bandits."

"Dionysus is the god of wine."

"Oh wait, you're right. I mean Dunamis... actually no, that's an angel."

"Really?"

"I think he's an angel of power? Anyways, let's just call him the king. When I heard your story, it reminded me of the passage in Houtarou's book report about the king and the bandits."

In his analysis, I'm pretty sure Oreki disagreed with Melos' theory that it was the king who hired the bandits to kill him and impede his progress to the kingdom.

"How is it related to me?"

"Do you remember his point? Houtarou wrote that because the king genuinely believed Melos wouldn't come back, there was no reason why he'd try to prevent his return. That kind of reasoning is just like him. I definitely got a good kick out of it."

I also smiled.

He continued, "So this is what I think, personally. Even if Melos managed to make it to the kingdom, the king doesn't lose anything. Melos probably wouldn't return, but even in the one-in-a-million chance that he did, the king wasn't in a position to really be affected by that. That's why, even if you look at it from this perspective, it's clear that the king wasn't the one who hired the bandits."

I can see how that made sense. If the king wanted to continue believing that 'you can never trust anyone' no matter what, and it was possible that Melos might challenge that conviction, I could see how the situation would

change, but in the actual story, I'm pretty sure that wasn't the case.

"Now with your situation," said Fuku-chan, "Hani-san seems to genuinely believe that there's no way Asanuma-san will complete the manga. And the thing is, even if it is successfully completed, I'm thinking it wouldn't bother her at all."

"What do you mean? If the manga is successful, then she and the others will have to quit the club."

"Hani-san proposed that herself, though, didn't she?"

Well yeah, but...

Fuku-chan lightly scratched his cheek. "I've been hearing a lot of stories about the Manga Society. Now that I've heard your account too, I'm starting to think that there's no longer any way to keep the club from splitting. All this talk about stalking, spies, and a coup d'état... there's clearly something messed up about this situation, even if you compare it to the rest of the strange clubs at this school. As far as I'm aware, the Manga Society is a pretty massive group with over thirty people, if you include the freshmen. Even if you split it into two, both groups would still be larger than the average club. I think your club president, Hani-san's goal was to make it possible to do this and to make two normal clubs... What's your take on this, Mayaka? Am I off?"

Fuku-chan's always been interested in lots of different things; no matter the subject, he always devours everything he possibly can. Ever since he joined the general committee in high school, though, I feel like he's gotten more and more keen, especially about things like procedures and official organization, as well as about people's true intentions. Take Oreki for example. He doesn't work well with others, so while he's aware of the concepts, he doesn't really fully grasp things like emotional facades and the self-justification people use to protect themselves. Fuku-chan sees through all of it, and even then, he never changes in the process. I think that's really amazing.

If Fuku-chan said there was no saving the Manga Society, then there might truly be no more hope after all. Sure enough, the internal feuding had

already reached the point of no return. I've never once thought that the club was better off splitting in two, but I can't say the same for Hani-san. Maybe she—

No, wait, there's a problem with that.

"If that were the case, wouldn't it be better for her to just quit the club without doing all this? Why doesn't she just take the fact that we were planning to make a manga and use that to kick us out without all the hassle?"

"I'm not so sure about that. If she left without a word, wouldn't that look like she was running away with her tail between her legs? She has to keep up appearances. On the other hand, if she wanted you guys to leave the club, it'd be virtually impossible for her to force your resignation using just that fact that you guys wanted to draw manga. If they went and cried to the club adviser about it, they'd be the ones getting yelled at—not you."

That's true. That'd be a pretty insufficient reason.

"I don't really know a lot about it," he continued, "but if the condition for you guys is to make *any* kind of manga, then that sounds like a pretty easy task, right?"

"I guess so, yeah. It'd be easy to make one if all we had to do was print it from any old printer."

"If the book is successfully completed, then Asanuma-san and the rest get to regain the honor they lost and everyone gets to break up on good terms. If the book doesn't get finished, then the fault lies entirely on Asanuma-san's group, and that becomes a reason to make them resign."

I understand his reasoning, but I can't see what comes after that. I started to raise my voice a little.

"But if that's true—if Hani-san's just like the king in Melos' story—then doesn't that mean she stole my notebook for no reason at all? If she stole it for fun, then doesn't that just make it bullying?"

I'm not saying it'd be okay if she had a reason, but if it really was out of

pure spite, I wouldn't be able to sit still.

Fuku-chan stared at the floor and quietly muttered, "You're right. That's the one strange part. It really is frustrating... If it were Houtarou, he'd be able to think of something, no problem. Why did she do it? She shouldn't have anything to gain from taking your notebook."

Every now and then, Fuku-chan says something ridiculous like: "A database can't draw conclusions." He knows a lot about various topics and always knows about the latest rumors, but he's convinced it's because of that that he has a hard time finding the truth. All that sounds like to me is that he's already given up before he even starts to try.

Right now though, he was seriously trying to figure it all out. Instead of saying his usual catchphrases—things like "I have no idea" or "There's nothing I can do about that"—Fuku-chan was completely still, focusing all of his effort on finding the answer.

I was also racking my mind with him, but at the same time, I couldn't help but stare at him in silence.

Finally, he started to speak with an uncharacteristically furrowed brow. "We're definitely going to get your notebook back, Mayaka, but—and I can't exactly explain why I feel this way—how about we try to wait and see what happens?"

Speaking from a realistic standpoint, no matter how hard Fuku-chan tried, and no matter how close to rage incarnate I became, there probably wasn't any way we'd be able to get the notebook back today, considering Hani-san had likely already gone home. If she did steal the notebook just to harass me, then it was probably already in some trashcan, up in smoke, or in the river on its way to the sea by now. If that wasn't the case, then there was still a chance to get it back, but Fuku-chan wanted to sit back for now.

"I'm glad you're so confident, but why do you want to wait?"

Fuku-chan was terrible at getting his point across clearly.

"I've seen you draw your manga before, and I'm pretty sure it's not like you

can't continue drawing it without that notebook, right? I understand you're pissed off, of course. I can't let it slide either, but if we approach this as objectively as possible, all you need is the time to rewrite what you lost."

He wasn't wrong. The notebook was pretty much only for my preparation, and it only took three days to make. Putting aside my emotions for now, it was nothing I couldn't salvage if I had three more days.

"If that's the case, then maybe Hani-san's goal was to buy time, don't you think? Maybe she wants to do something with those three days. Think about it; whenever someone gets kidnapped in one of those thriller novels, people always end up waiting for the culprit to contact them first. Let's try to wait and observe how things turn out a little more before we decide on what to do."

"Sure, but I feel like it also might better to stop her as soon as possible in case she's planning on doing something terrible."

"Yeah. If that happens, I'll protect you."

... It was pretty much impossible for me to not wonder if he'd be able to do anything like that in the first place, but then again, by that logic, I guess it was also pretty much impossible for there not to be part of me that completely trusted him. I nodded resolutely.

"Okay, I understand. I'll give it a little time. Is it better if I don't say anything to Hani-san tomorrow?"

"That's a difficult one. I get the feeling that she'll contact you if she has any demands, but who knows. I swear. I really wish Houtarou was here at times like these."

It's true that if Oreki were here, he might be able to connect the dots better than we could.

The thing is, I haven't once wished he was here instead. Thanks.

6.

It was Friday, May 18th. Although it was a date I used to look forward to, everything weighed far too heavily on my mind.

I forgot my handkerchief while leaving the house and ended up later to school than normal, and although Hani-san was in the classroom when I got there, she casually ignored me like I was a random passerby, even though our eyes met. I guess I could always grab her shoulders and shake her around, yelling, "Give me back my notebook!" but I decided to trust in Fuku-chan's advice. Besides, things would get even worse if I accidentally ended up hurting her, so I guess I'll sit still for now.

Telling Asanuma-san about my progress was even more nerve-racking than confronting Hani-san. Although I told her I'd decide whether or not I'd participate and how many pages I'd have by Friday, I wasn't able to make the deadline. I did have her email address, but you really got to do these kinds of things in person, so I waited until lunch and then headed to classroom 2-A to talk with her.

There, only around two or three students were still eating. The rest of them had already finished and were doing other things. It's kind of strange—even though it's not against the rules, I found it a bit uncomfortable to go to another classroom. While I hesitated at the door, a slim, pretty girl noticed I was there and called out to me, "Looking for someone?"

"Um, yeah. Asanuma-san."

"Oh yeah? I wonder if she's here."

The girl glanced back really quickly and found Asanuma-san sitting by the window. She walked over to her and started to talk about something. The girl pointed over to me, and was probably telling Asanuma-san how I was looking for her. The second she noticed me, Asanuma-san's expression darkened a little, and she started to walk over to me with heavy steps.

"What's up?"

Her voice was listless—she must also be in a terrible mood. It felt

absolutely terrible to kick her while she was down like this. All it did was revive my anger towards the person who stole my notebook.

"I said I'd get back to you on Friday about my decision, right?"

"Yeah."

As she responded, Asanuma-san started to look furtively to her left and right. Maybe she was uncomfortable with talking about the manga in the classroom, or maybe she was just being cautious of anyone listening in after what happened when her plans were leaked. Seeing her like that made me speak in the same quiet volume.

"Sorry, but can you wait a little longer?"

Her eyebrows rose.

"What? What do you mean? Weren't you the one who told me it’d be today?"

I knew she wasn't going to be happy or anything, but I didn't expect her to react this strongly.

I'd already decided that, no matter what happened, I wouldn't tell her about Hani-san stealing my notebook. I didn't have any proof, and if the others learned that it was a possibility, it might fan the already raging flames of conflict between factions in the broken Manga Society. Of course, if I can't get the notebook in the end, I'll be pouring a gallon of gasoline on those flames, but for now, I'll stay quiet.

"I'm really, really sorry. I thought I could finish it by now, but the rough draft isn't finished and all..."

She sighed loudly and overtly.

"Okay. I hope you're not planning on jumping ship."

There was understandably a lot of venom in her voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Tai cried and ran away, and Nishiyama was the one who betrayed us and told everyone. And now here you are, telling me you want me to wait even longer. I think it's pretty natural for me to assume you might be trying to abandon the project too."

Although she started the whole thing, I guess I really did feel a little sorry for her. Everything aside, the fact of the matter was that I didn't keep our promise, and that was my fault. I lowered my head again.

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, you're going to do it with me, right?"

I understand why she's so desperate, but it's a little too much.

"I came here to apologize to you. Don't you trust me?"

She sighed once more, this time much more naturally.

"I'm sorry, I'm just a little on edge."

"Me too. It's okay."

"So, how long do you need?"

I was halfway through the rough draft already, so if I managed to get the notebook back by Monday, then I could probably finish it by Tuesday. If I wasn't able to retrieve it, though, then I'd have to start all the way back from writing the dialogue. If I worked on it over the weekend, assuming that I wouldn't be getting the notebook back...

"Wednesday... Yeah, next Wednesday."

Asanuma-san nodded, her eyes cast somewhat downwards. "Got it. Sorry Ibara. Sorry this all got so complicated..."

It's true she was the one that organized this all, but I was also happy when I first heard I'd get the chance to draw. There was no reason for her to apologize. Without saying any of that, though, I simply responded, "See you," and left the classroom.

When I got back to my own class, lunch break was almost over, and most of the students had already gotten back into their seats. Fifth period was PE. I walked back to my own desk, almost thankful that I'd be able to get some exercise, and suddenly noticed the sound of footsteps coming towards me. I turned around and saw Hani-san, not a shred of worry in her expression. She started talking in a cheery voice that was very much the same way.

"Maya-cchi, you free after school today?"

I wonder how I would've responded had I not prepared myself emotionally. Would I have yelled, "Don't mess with me!" at her, or would I have been afraid at what she meant by that? In reality, neither was the case; I was actually a bit happy that what Fuku-chan had predicted came true. Thanks to him, even I was able to remain calm as I responded, "I have library duty until 5:00. I'm free after then, if that's okay. Is something wrong?"

For a brief moment, Hani-san stared closely at me—maybe she thought I'd be more shaken up—but she quickly reverted back to her smile.

"Sorry, but could you come with me somewhere after school?"

I artificially tilted my head in thought, and said, "Umm, I'm not really feeling today. What's going on?"

"I wanted to return something, and I'd rather do it sooner than later."

I really wasn't good at all this feeling each other out stuff. With every hollow word, I felt my cheeks getting hotter and hotter, and I could only barely hold back my anger.

"You're right. Sooner the better. What do you want me to do then?"

Hani-san nodded satisfied. "Do you know that shop, Byron?"

"The cake shop next to the culture center?"

"Yeah, that one. That makes this quick. There's a small tea cafe section inside. You can sit there, even if you only order tea—did you know that? I

wanted to meet you there at 5:30. Does that work for you?"

I could be wrong, but it sounded like she wanted to do some kind of hostage exchange with the notebook. She made it out to be some kind of equal-footed conversation, but in reality, I was completely powerless. I wanted painfully to turn it back on her and flat-out refuse, but I restrained myself and instead returned a smile.

"Of course! Can't wait."

"I know, right? See you at 5:30, then."

Although it was a date I used to look forward to, everything weighed far too heavily on my mind. The bell rang, and all the girls in class started heading towards the locker rooms to change.

I left the school grounds at 5:05, and as I walked briskly towards the shop, a lot of things circled around in my head.

First was about how Hani-san came to me first, just like Fuku-chan had predicted. He'd told me to wait for a while, but all it took was a single day for the situation to change again. What on earth was she trying to do? Did she steal my notebook to use it as bait and make me meet with her? I doubt it. We weren't especially close, but if she did want to talk, I would've agreed without making a scene. There'd be no reason to steal anything.

Maybe she wanted to look inside, to see exactly what kind of manga Asanuma-san was making? If Hani-san had asked me to let her look at my notebook, I probably would've found some reason or another to refuse. I mean it's embarrassing. Wouldn't stealing it be the only way for her to do so?

No, I don't think that's likely either. Just because I was certain I'd be stubborn and refuse doesn't mean Hani-san would be as well. For her, it'd make more sense to ask first. There'd be no reason to use such a heavy handed tactic from the very start.

It's started to feel more and more like I was trapped in box, trying to figure

out what Hani-san wanted, so I decided to try and think about something else. I'll probably end up feeling really terrible by the time I eventually sit down and talk with her at Byron.

Actually, now that I think about it, there's no guarantee that it'll only be the two of us. I have no idea how many people will be there. What should I do if I go there and I find the rest of the reading faction waiting for me with nailed-in bats, saying, "So ya did come. Guess we can congratulate ya for yer balls before we bash yer head in!" Well, probably not.

If they wanted to gang up on me, then doing so at school would probably be easier, so that probably wasn't it. The fact that it wasn't limited to Hani-san alone was still possible, though. I wish I could go with someone else, like maybe Fuku-chan, Chi-chan, or Asanuma-san. No, this is my problem, so I'd like to do as much as I can by myself.

Because the time we agreed on was thirty minutes after my library duty ended, I couldn't stop by the book store on the way. I'd been excited—or rather anxious—for this day for a while now, but I couldn't really ask anyone else to do it.

I did genuinely want to do this as soon as possible, but 5:30 in the evening was a bit rough for me. My mom wouldn't say anything, even if I was late, but she always makes such a disappointed face. I sent her a message saying I might be late because of library duty and a club meeting, but I really wanted to get home before dinner, if at all possible.

I also didn't like the fact that she chose Byron at all. Kamiyama's a small city, so there aren't really a lot of western sweets shops. Byron's considered one of the only ones, and its cakes are always the talk of the town. When I was in elementary school, my parents would get me a Byron cake for my birthday every year without fail, and the stuff we brought to Chi-chan's house the other day was also from the same shop. It was difficult for me to think up a shop that both Hani-san and I knew and was good for high school students to hang out in in the heat of the moment, but I didn't want to have such a depressing conversation in a place I only had fond memories of.

But I guess there was no avoiding it. In the time that I spent thinking about

those things, I ended up in front of the white walls and nary roof tiles that distinguished Byron. I looked at my watch, and saw the time was 5:27. Barely made it. As I got here kind of fast, my breathing was a little ragged and it felt like I was also sweating a bit. I took a couple of deep breaths and dabbed my forehead and neck with my handkerchief.

Well then, now that I've come this far, there's no point in getting worked up. I don't care if there are lions or tigers waiting for me. I'll beat them up, get my notebook back, and then be on my way home. I lightly slapped my cheeks and walked inside.

Colorful cakes were lined up inside the shop's refrigerated cases. It was the time of year for peach, and almost that for cherry blossoms. My eyes wandered over the strawberry and chocolate cakes, but I couldn't feel excited. The shop assistant's uniform was a solid black dress, save for a white trim along the collar, and a matching black hat, and she almost looked something like a nun. With a relaxed voice and smile, she said, "Welcome."

"Umm, I wanted to use the cafe."

"Of course. It's further inside."

I'd never gone this far back in Byron before. I continued to walk through a narrow, dimly lit hallway in the direction she pointed at, and then suddenly found myself in a large space.

The ceiling was high and the windows wide, and there was a large grandfather clock sitting by the wall over the room's wooden floor. Hani-san called it a small section, but it felt more like an event hall. I figured it was a bit late for tea since there was hardly anyone there. There was only one customer—a girl in a sailor uniform with her back turned to me. She slowly turned around, maybe hearing my footsteps.

"Glad to see you came, Ibara."

My entire body froze. I couldn't say a thing.

I said I didn't care if there were lions or tigers, but I had no idea this one would show up. It was the Kamiyama high school senior, the former Manga Research Society member, Ayako Kouchi.

She smiled softly and continued, "Don't be so scared. Didn't Hani tell you anything? Oh, don't worry about this. I'll cover the bill—I'm your upperclassman after all!"

The conflict between the reading and drawing factions in the Manga Society first started during last year's culture festival, but things really took a turn for the worse when Kouchi-senpai, the de-facto leader of the reading faction, decided to quit the club earlier than the rest of the seniors. Once they lost the person who acted as a lid on the conflict, the club began to tear apart.

That very person was here right now, mentioning Hani. I couldn't make sense of anything, and I was suddenly seized by the desire to turn right around and make a break for the door. Kouchi-senpai beckoned me over with her hand.

"Don't just stand there with your mouth open. Come over and sit down already."

Her words were calm, but it felt like there was a bit of tension in her voice. It didn't seem like she was picking a fight, but I couldn't figure out what was making her sound like that as I cautiously approached her table.

In front of her was a cup full of black tea, a teapot decorated with flowers, and a single notebook. On the empty seat next to her was a paper bag with something the thickness of a manga magazine resting inside. There were no menus on top of the round table, but the nun-like shop assistant from earlier came by and gave one to each of us.

I didn't have an appetite, so I ordered black tea.

Once she returned back through the hallway, Kouchi-senpai and I were the only ones left in the room. I suddenly remembered what Fuku-chan had said earlier about my situation being similar to Oreki's book report. The report itself hinted at the person pulling the strings not being the king, and it looked like in my case, there was a puppeteer behind Hani-san as well. Though, I did know the two of them were close friends.

Kouchi-senpai brought the cup of tea to her lips and then returned it to the

saucer with a small clink.

"So? How's everything been with the Manga Society recently?"

"Terrible."

Maybe she wanted to start off with a little small talk, but I couldn't help but blurt out the truth. How long had it been weighing on my mind?

"Everyone's insulting and harassing at each other. I'm absolutely sick of it. Why did you quit, senpai?"

Had Kouchi-senpai only put off quitting for a little while longer, the club may have been able to recover before it turned out like this. I don't hate her for it; everyone should be free to join or quit their club whenever they want. It's just that I can't help but think it was because she left that all of this happened.

"Yeah, well... yeah..."

She drew out her response, and then picked her teacup up to refill it with black tea, looking as if she were trying the avoid the subject.

Soon after, the shop assistant came out again and brought me my own black tea. "I recommend waiting two minutes before you drink it. Would you like sugar?" she asked.

Normally I did prefer sugar with my coffee and tea, but this time I felt like drinking something bitter.

"No, thank you."

The assistant left the room one more time. I couldn't stand the silence, so I was the first one to start talking.

"Did you have my notebook stolen, senpai?"

Her eyes were fixed on her teacup, she responded, "Yeah, pretty much."

I was on the verge of asking her why, but there was something else I needed

to do first.

"Give it back."

Before anything else, I refuse to talk with her any longer until I get my notebook back. Her expression looked strange, as if forcing a small smile, and she responded, "Of course," before placing her hand on top of the notebook. "But don't go running off the second you get it."

"Are you going to force me by taking that hostage?"

"I guess you're mad after all. Well, it's not like I can blame you." She let go of the teacup and then slowly bowed in front of me. "I'm sorry. It was all my fault. I really want you to hear me out, though."

I wasn't planning on forgiving her. Although, that said, I knew basically nothing about what it was I wasn't going to forgive. I hardened my voice, and said, "Alright. I'm not exactly happy yet, but I'll listen."

"Thanks." She pushed the notebook over to my side of the table and continued, "I didn't look inside."

As soon as the notebook was in my hands, I subconsciously brought and held it close to my chest. I wanted to check if everything was okay inside, but doing so would probably look like I didn't trust what Kouchi-senpai said about not looking, so I decided to hold off for now. In it was nothing more than a couple notes—nothing that couldn't be replaced—but the second I placed it in my bag, the fact that I had gotten it back finally became real to me, and I could feel the tension draining from my body. I have to tell Fuku-chan I got it back when I get home so he doesn't have to worry.

I poured some tea into my cup and took a sip. I slowly gulped, the warm tea filling my stomach with strength, and then looked directly at Kouchi-senpai.

"So? What did you want to talk about?"

"Yeah." Her eyes regained their original intensity as she returned my stare. "Ibara."

"Yes?"

"Quit the Manga Society."

So it came to that.

I paused for several seconds and then responded.

"So you stole my notebook to threaten me like that?"

"A threat, huh? I'm the one in the wrong here, so I guess I can't really argue with that." She sighed and her head dropped slightly, a faint smile appearing on her lips. "You're overthinking it. That's not what this is."

I didn't respond. She looked up once more.

"I heard what happened with Asanuma. One of the girls she asked chickened out and told Hani everything. Hani asked me for advice, so that's why I know what went down, more or less. She also told me that Asanuma asked you to join as well. You seemed to be pretty on board."

I wouldn't say "on board" was the best way to describe it...

"As long as I can draw manga..."

"Then you don't care where? You should care, for heaven's sake."

I stayed silent at her firm disapproval. Kouchi-senpai brought her right arm on top of the table and leaned forward a little.

"Do you really have enough time to be playing around with that kind of pointless stuff? All Asanuma wants is to fight over control of the club—you do realize this, right?"

I wanted to argue that Asanuma-san really did care about manga in her own way, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I had never read her manga, nor did I even know what kind of manga she liked. Now that I think about it, I don't think I've ever even had a proper discussion with her about manga in the first place. Her wording really bugs me, though.

"Why don't I have enough time, then? Is there something else I should be doing instead?"

"You need to be improving your own manga. If you go along with Asanuma's plan and work on some dumb project, you're basically wasting time, right?"

I was shocked. I don't think any of it showed on my face, but Kouchi-senpai continued passionately, as if she could tell how I felt. "Nothing good will come of it if you continue working on that."

"..."

"The Manga Society's just holding you back."

Of course I'm aware of what's going on. There had been times when I'd fantasized about all the interesting stories we could've made had everyone not been at each other's throats—no, I'd be lying if I said I didn't imagine that possibility at every second I was in the club. But even after admitting that, I definitely don't think they are holding me back in any way.

And yet, my response was so pathetically weak.

"That's... not true."

Kouchi-senpai noticed it as well.

"Are you trying to stick up for your friends? Or is it that you feel like quitting now would mean you're giving up halfway? Then let me add this: just like the club's not doing any good for you, you aren't doing any good for the club. You might not be the whole reason all this happened, but you're definitely part of it."

She was probably talking about when I had the dirty water spilled on me during the cultural festival, the result of our argument. I mean, sure it further divided both of the factions, but it was an accident, and there was nothing I could've done about that.

"You don't have a clue what I'm talking about, do you. Our baseball team's

pretty weak. Don't you agree?"

The topic suddenly switched, and for a moment, I was speechless.

"Yeah... I guess I heard something like that."

"It's no surprise, really. Kamiyama High's just a feeder school, so it makes sense that our baseball team is on that level too. This kind of situation is pretty typical. So now, what if a once-in-a-generation athletic genius—the kind that would rise to the top, even in powerhouse schools—joined our team? What do you think would happen then?"

She gave me a second to consider it, and then continued.

"The rest of the team would be inspired to practice more and more until they finally became stronger? Yeah right. That kind of thing only happens in manga. Nine times out of ten, they'll be all too aware of their limits, and the most they'll amount to is a thorn in the genius' side."

I guess she was talking about the current Kamiyama High School Manga Society.

"I'm..." I started with difficulty, "I'm nowhere near a once-in-a-generation genius."

"Yeah, I agree calling you that is going overboard," Kouchi-senpai immediately agreed. She quickly added, however, "But the thing is, you have the smallest trace, the tiniest smidge of genius in you. At the very least, you're as talented as I am."

I'd read Kouchi-senpai's manga before.

It was called "Bodytalk." I thought it was good. *Really* good.

"You're much better than I am," I said.

"Well, that's because I'm your upperclassman. Listen, being humble is fine and all, but you've got to start looking at yourself objectively."

She brought the teacup to her lips and made a soft noise as she gazed down at the tea. The cup shook slightly as she held it up, and she spoke as if whispering, "I... want to become a professional. I suck now, but I really want to get better."

Hearing the words "I suck" come out of Kouchi-senpai like that made me lose my mental composure. A lot had happened between her and I, but that never caused me to enjoy her manga any less. She has an incredible sense of humor, and whenever I read it during tough times, it always puts a smile on my face, while if I read it when I'm happy, it can even make me feel sad.

"I wasn't able to quit the Manga Society," she said, "And just like you, I wasn't able to draw manga while surrounded by all of the fighting. I couldn't stop myself from wanting to stay, for God knows what reason. I couldn't leave any of it behind."

She looked directly into my eyes, as if trying to convince me of something.

"I really regret it. I used up two of my three years at high school in that place."

In the silence that followed, she seemed to be drilling it in that I'd also used up one of mine.

Her hand clenched into a fist.

"I needed to be drawing more. That's why I quit. I also have talent in me—it might be a tiny, near-worthless scrap of it, but I needed to hold it sacred regardless."

To hold your talent sacred...

It's so difficult, though, senpai. It's so incredibly scary to turn your back on your friends like that and start placing all your trust in this unreliable talent of yours. Is that what she's doing? Is that what she wants me to do?

Suddenly, Kouchi-senpai's voice became strangely cheerful.

"You should quit too, Ibara."

"But..."

"Quit the Manga Society, and work with me."

I was speechless. Did I hear that correctly? She continued on without repeating herself.

"You remember 'A Corpse by Evening,' right?"

There was no way I could forget. I bought it when I visited the Kamiyama High culture festival as a middle school student; it was really important to me. The realization that a high school student could create something incredible like that made me change fundamentally, and I joined the Manga Society without a second thought right after I entered high school as a result. I realize now, of course, that I should've given it a second thought after all, as the author of "A Corpse by Evening" wasn't actually in the club.

As she brought it up, Kouchi-senpai's expression seemed to darken slightly.

"It was legendary. I couldn't even read it, and it blew you away too. Now it's my turn. Mine... and yours."

A chill ran down my spine.

She raised a single finger.

"Two things will come out of this. First, unlike going along with Asanuma's plan, this will give the both of us valuable experience. From what I've seen, your dialogue tends to get pretty bogged down because you try to say everything. As for me—how can I put this—my manga doesn't really excite people. I have some pretty bad habits. The both of us will definitely be able to gain something from this."

Then she raised a second finger.

"Plus, just like 'A Corpse by Evening' did, it'll inspire new students for years to come. The Manga Society is in a miserable state right now, but we'll be the ones to pass down its tradition."

Is she serious?

"You're going to sell it at the culture festival?"

She nodded. "That's right."

Doing that was probably against school rules, but there was an even bigger problem.

"Won't everyone in the club hate us if we do that?!"

I didn't hear anything about there being trouble with the author of "A Corpse by Evening" not being from the Manga Society, however if I not only quit the club, but also sold my own manga at the culture festival, then I'd be basically picking a fight with every book sold.

She kept her composure.

"That's why I'm saying you should quit—if you keep on trying to look out for them, you'll never be able to draw what you want. Of course they'll hate us. So what? It's not like they're going to beat us up or anything. Actually... you think they might? Oh well, one punch shouldn't be too bad."

"All I want to do is draw manga, though."

"It's a little too late for that. Just by wanting to draw manga, you're already the odd one out, and lots of people already can't stand you. If you don't like that, then you have to choose one of two options: either you give up drawing or you get better and shut them all up."

It's not like I didn't understand; it's just that it's difficult to hear it so blunt like that.

"And honestly speaking," she continued, "no one in that club even read any of the manga you put your heart and soul into in the first place. It's fine. It's fine. If we just ask someone to sell it for us, no one will find out."

Now that she mentioned it, in the Manga Society, there was a bunch of fan works going around. There were four months until the culture festival, and if I worked with Kouchi-senpai on it, the design would probably be pretty

different than what I normally did too, so I guess... it might be okay?

I drank some tea to calm my nerves. "But that means I have to tell Asanuma-san I won't help her... I don't know if..."

"If you can? I hate to break it to you, but when she was trying to recruit people for her project, she was telling them you were going to be the one to compile it all."

That's news to me.

"Listen, you're just being used. Are you still going to be loyal to Asanuma after all that?"

I guess I'd also known vaguely that was the case, but thinking back to today at lunch, I couldn't just turn my back on her.

"I asked Asanuma-san to wait for me. I absolutely can't quit the club and refuse to work with her after doing that."

She let out a deep sigh.

"I guess there's nothing I can do about that. You did four pages for the culture festival last year, didn't you? You did it for the anthology that we ended up not making because of what happened."

I did, actually, now that she mentioned it. I did some four panel strips that introduced the Manga Research Society, under no real obligation to do so, but the anthology was scrapped soon after because of a disagreement, so I stored it away.

"Just give her that," she continued, "Even if you tell her you wrote it last year, I'm sure she wouldn't complain."

I see... I'm surprised she remembered that—even I forgot.

Before I give her my answer, there's something I need to ask.

Maybe Kouchi-senpai was helping me out because I was so entangled in

what was happening in the club. Or maybe she just wanted to make manga with her barely capable underclassman. Either would've made me happy, but at this point, I still haven't found anything that made me want to forgive her.

I refilled the now-empty teacup to the brim and let it sit for a moment before taking a sip. Taking a deep breath, I looked up at her. "Okay, I understand. Just one question, senpai."

"Hm?"

"Why did you steal my notebook, then?"

When I imagined all of the grief and anger this person put me through yesterday after school, I lost my ability to trust and work with her more and more.

Kouchi-senpai's eyes darkened.

"I heard you were on the fence when Asanuma asked you to help make her manga, so I got a little worried. If you ended up agreeing to help, I would've lost my chance to convince you. You're so stubborn like that. You would've refused to quit the club, and you wouldn't have teamed up with me. That's why I asked Hani to do something to stop you from giving your answer by Friday evening."

She sighed a little and then continued.

"Please don't hate Hani. She only did it since I asked her to. If it's any consolation, I had no idea she'd do something like that either. If I had explained the situation better to her, then she might've done something less drastic, but a lot of it is difficult to tell her..."

I'm guessing she didn't tell Hani-san anything about wanting to pair up with me to release a manga for the culture festival. If we were going to do this, we'd have to be sneaky about it. The less people she told the better.

I followed Kouchi-senpai's explanation well enough, but there was still one thing that didn't fully make sense.

"Why by Friday evening?"

She probably heard that I was going to give my answer to Asanuma-san on Friday after school, so the only way she could buy time was by messing with my rough draft. Putting aside how I felt about that, her reasoning at least made sense. What I didn't understand was why she wanted to delay it until that evening.

"That's because, well..."

Kouchi-senpai blinked several times, looking at me like I'd just asked her the most obvious thing in the world. She then muttered, "Oh, that's right," under her breath and went to grab what was inside the paper bag on the empty seat next to her.

In that instant, my entire body stiffened. In her hand was the June issue of the monthly manga magazine, *La Shin*, the cover of which was illustrated by Yutaka Niiro.

"Because today's the release day."

It's true today was May 18th, the day when *La Shin* hits the shelves. Not only that, but the June issue was the one that had the results of the New World Prize. Because I was so motivated by last time's results, I also submitted another one this time around, so I was really looking forward to getting it today. And yet, why was I looking at it now?

A small, teasing smile showed on her lips—she probably enjoyed seeing me flustered like this—and she said, "Congrats on your participation award last time, Kazuru Ihara."

I accidentally let out a small yelp. She continued, almost sounding fed up with me.

"Don't be so surprised. How many times have you submitted stuff under this name? You even did it at that event in Ohsu, didn't you? I also read *La Shin*, you know. Of course I'd notice."

Who could've imagined she figured it out.

Kouchi-senpai stared at the cover of *La Shin*.

"I saw your name come up in the March issue, and it made me ask myself what the heck I've been doing with my life. Well, everyone in the club started going at it the second I left, so I guess you could say I was pretty important in keeping the peace in my own way, but I didn't have the time to be doing things like that. The second I realized it, I quit."

She placed her hand on top of the magazine.

"Because I saw that 'good luck on your next submission' in your evaluation, it dawned on me that you've probably been sending in submissions for a long time now. So, I was thinking—though, honestly, I figured the chances were slim—that if you'd managed to get the top prize in this issue, then there was no reason for you to waste your time pairing up with me. Of course you should try and go pro as soon as you can. That's why I wanted to wait until the release day to talk with you about it. If we agreed to be partners earlier on, and it turned out that you got the award, I figured you'd probably try to stick with me out of obligation."

My eyes were glued to the June issue of "La Shin" in front of me. I barely heard anything I was being told. She smiled slightly, and pushed the magazine towards me.

"I guess you're pretty curious. Want to read it?"

"Yes, please."

"I've already seen it."

"H-how was it?"

She smiled silently back. I picked up the copy of "La Shin" and flipped to the last page to check the table of contents. Not even able to pretend I was relaxed, I opened it to the page that announced the winners.

15th New World Prize winner: "The Strange Tale of the Cold Sea" by Enma Haru

I looked for my name in the runner-ups... and there was nothing.

I looked under the participation awards, and...

I wordlessly placed the magazine back down.

"It's tough. I know," she said in in a soft voice, the kind that only someone who had gone through the same experience before could manage, "So, will you team up with me?"

"...Yeah."

"Good."

Ayako Kouchi-senpai nodded firmly.

"Ibara, we're going to create a legend. A legendary volume that will continue on in Kamiyama High School. And then..."

"We'll get even better. Right?"

The smile that appeared on her face was the best one she had ever showed me.

I quit the Manga Research Society.

5 - The Long Holiday

1.

From the second I woke up, I had the feeling that something was off.

I opened my eyes and turned to look at the clock next to my pillow. The display showed 7:00, and next to it was an indicator reading Sunday.

I felt none of the light-headed grogginess that usually accompanied a rude awakening. The slightest bit of drowsiness remained in my head, but I didn't feel like going back to sleep. I slowly struggled to roll over face-down in my bed and then did what was essentially a pushup to raise myself up.

The strange thing was what happened when I let down my legs from the side of the bed. As I stared at the morning light seeping through the crack in the curtains, I started to mutter to myself in disbelief.

"I feel good."

Both in body and in spirit, absolutely nothing was amiss.

That's not to say I was used to constantly being in some kind of bad bodily condition. In that sense, rather than saying I was in good condition, it'd probably be more appropriate to say that, today, I felt perfectly full of energy. So much that it even crossed my mind that I might even need to do something completely pointless to lower my energy reserves back to normal levels. Moments like these didn't come often.

I went to the kitchen and peered into the refrigerator. We had bacon, maitake mushrooms, and mustard spinach, so I took them out and cut them into large pieces. I put a slice of bread into the toaster and then beat some eggs in a small bowl. As I did so, I haphazardly added some processed cheese, milk, and a little bit later, some curry powder to the mix. Of the two burners, I used one to fry the bacon mix and the other to cook the eggs. Shoot... I didn't have enough room to heat the water up, so my coffee would

have to wait.

I brought my meal with me to the living room. Spreading nothing on the toast, it was fluffy as I stuffed it into my mouth. I heard the sound of someone descending down the stairs. My parents are both away on a business trip, so it had to be my older sister. The sound of footsteps continued towards the kitchen.

"Wow, there's breakfast!"

She has a lot of energy this morning.

"Did you make this, Houtarou?"

"Who knows? For all we know it might've been a burglar."

"It's still hot, too. He must still be close... Don't give me any of that sass."

Without responding, I took a bit of the bacon dish and put it on top of the toast. My sister started talking again.

"Can I have some?"

My mouth was full, so I simply nodded. There's no way she'd see it all the way from the kitchen, but she'd still take some even if I said no, so there wasn't any point in asking. Besides, I made enough for her portion as well.

"Hey, it's actually not bad!" she said. She sure didn't waste any time when it came to being rude.
"Get yourself a plate."

"What's with this taste? Did you put something in this?"

She probably had a bite of the eggs. The jar of curry powder was left on the kitchen counter, and I had enough faith in her that she'd figure it out herself, so I continued to eat without saying a word. Sure enough...

"Oh, this, huh?" she asked. "It's not like it's anything complicated, but it's still pretty above and beyond you. What going on, Houtarou? Did anything

happen?"

Sharp as always. I took a sip of milk and said, "I feel good."

Just as I imagined would be the case, she returned a single, dubious "What?"

After getting out of bed and eating breakfast, I did some cleaning and laundry. I scrubbed the bathtub and then boiled some udon for lunch. It was 1:00. The day was long.

I went into my room, planted myself on top of my bed, and started to think. What should I do now? Peering out the window with its curtains pulled back, the sky looked perfect. Due to a recent stationary front, rain had continued to fall and fall these past days. This kind of sunshine was the first in a long time.

"I guess I'll go outside..."

I changed into a pair of pants with deep pockets and stuck a small paperback book into one of them. I put on a polo shirt and looked outside once more. A smile had formed on my face before I realized.

"Wouldn't want to waste this perfectly good weather."

To think that I, Houtarou Oreki, of all people, would grow unwilling to spend a sunny day inside... If Satoshi heard me say that, he'd probably come rushing over to check me for a fever. I picked my wallet up, but on a whim, I instead took out a single thousand yen note and stuffed it into my other pocket.

Although I left the house, it wasn't like I had any specific plans in mind. It'd just be a simple walk, is all. Though I do want to decide on a destination.

"So, where's a good place to go?"

I thought of going to a bookstore, but due to various reasons, I was short on

cash this month. Besides, the paperback in my pocket could probably last me throughout the day.

That meant that I should probably look for a place where I could read. I thought about going somewhere along the riverbank, but we were nearing the season when the bugs start coming out again. I had a bad feeling about being next to the water at this time. Also, the bank is out in the open, so I'd be easily seen by passersby. I wasn't generally concerned about being stared at by others and have some tolerance with it, but even that tolerance has a limit.

There was a shrine for Hachiman nearby.[4] It'd be quiet, and there were rocks good for sitting on as well. How about that? Feeling good about that option, I started to walk towards its direction, but something held me back. The shrine was too close by. I was feeling too good today; I felt like my energy would overflow if I didn't go far enough away.

"Then, how about this?"

I turned on my heels. Arekusu Shrine should be sufficiently far. Although it might sound like I was being overly preoccupied with shrines, I probably ended up wanting to go Arekusu only because I considered Hachiman's shrine first.

I started to walk. At first, I felt I bit cold with only a polo shirt on, but I quickly began to warm up and soon felt perfect. Purposely avoiding the road I normally took on the way to school, I instead threaded along unfamiliar back streets. The area might've been a natural wind tunnel as, although I was surrounded by fences on both sides, I still felt a cool breeze blow up against me. I spotted a cat sitting atop one of the fences. It had tiger stripes and a somewhat pissed-off expression.

"Hey," I said, raising a hand in greeting. Perhaps startled, however, the cat immediately ran away. That was bad of me.

I continued to slowly stroll on and neared a bridge. Because of the rain yesterday, the river had risen considerably. I stopped momentarily and gazed upon the murky, rumbling waters.

"Early-summer rains

Add to and ever hasten,

Mogami River..."[5]

Well, this wasn't the Mogami River, and yesterday's weather conditions weren't really early-summer rains either. Maybe I'd be able to think up a more suitable haiku if I was more cultured, but you can't give what you don't have. Satoshi would've probably been able to come up with a good one. Or maybe this was more up Chitanda's alley.

I passed by in front of a takoyaki shop. A sweet aroma wafted in the air. Although I'd already eaten breakfast, something about it was oddly alluring. I had a one thousand yen note with me—the takoyaki were something I could buy... The temptation slowly crept upon me. Wait... Hold on. Get a grip. If I were to buy some now, where would I sit down to eat them? I managed to endure the urge by the skin of my teeth, and I could feel myself speeding up as I walked away.

After I walked for around ten minutes, I noticed that the number of unfamiliar roads increased. Although I've never left this town in my entire life, a mere ten minutes brought me to such unknown areas. What an economical life I've led. I've never thought too poorly of my sense of direction, so I was able to continue along this untrodden route with a certain degree of confidence. Go over here and then there, and then if I turn somewhere around here...

I entered an open area. That was splendidly done, if I do say so myself. I stood facing the very Arekusu Shrine itself.

"Now then..." I muttered, looking up at the large torii gate. I had forgotten about that. The shrine was on the side of a hill. What that meant was, to get to the main grounds, I'd have to continue up the long flight of stairs leading up to it. It didn't matter how good I was feeling today, possessed by some strange condition leading me to take an idle stroll—I wasn't so sure about doing *that.* I hesitated for a moment, and then—

"Oh well, I guess it's fine."

—I then proceeded.

I walked up and up, counting each step along the way. Not before long, I noticed overgrown cedar trees starting to line both sides of the path. The temperature gently started to fall. As I passed thirty steps, I lost count. Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty, a whole bunch... I'd never given much thought to what kind of job I wanted in the future, but I'm fairly certain that one involving counting might not be the best match for me.

My breathing quickened. I'd have a difficult time reading my book now, too. Should I just sit on the steps and start reading here? No, no... I'm already more than halfway there. Just a little, little bit longer. I continued to climb, my body leaning forward as I did.

I must've done more than a hundred steps—not that I counted, of course. I finally made it to the top and took a deep breath. My eyes fell on a small structure containing a basin of water for ceremonial washing. I wanted to drink a mouthful, but I doubt the water was intended to be used that way. I looked around for a vending machine... but like one would've figured, there weren't any in sight.

My eyes were wandering around the area when I locked eyes with someone who had just left the shrine's administration office. She had on a casual T-shirt and shorts, looking as if she hadn't even left her house for the day. She wore glasses with small lenses, and her hair was long.

"Ah!"

It was Kaho Juumonji. I guess she technically hadn't left her house for the day, considering she lived here as well. It looked like she had also realized it was me and slowly walked over.

"Welcome."

She placed her hands in front of her body, palms-down, and lowered her head politely. Normally, I would've been shaken up being unexpectedly greeted like this, but I remembered falling for the same trick in the past.

"Thanks," I replied, at any rate. She pouted back, probably unsatisfied with my calm reaction, but quickly smiled.

"Did you come to pay the shrine a visit?"

"Not really, but... actually, I guess I could do that too."

"You're weird."

"I'm taking a walk."

I guess it was a bit difficult to say that the shrine was any old location for me to someone who actually lived there.

Juumonji turned around to face the direction of the administration office she came out from.

"Eru's here."

"What?"

"Eru's here."

Sounds like something Gennai Hiraga would invent.[6] Eru's here...

Wait... Eru's here?!

"Wha... why?"

She snickered back. "She's just here to hang out. You can also come in if you'd like. I'll make you some tea."

"No, it's okay. I'm just—"

"It’s not like you’re unrelated to what we’re currently talking about, you know."

Me? What could it be about?

"I won't force you," she continued, "but you know what they say. 'Even chance meetings are preordained.'"

"Is that a Buddhist saying?"

"It's a principle that goes beyond the boundaries of religion."

"I don't know..."

"Still, I have to say... Actually, never mind. I think I'd rather you see it for yourself. Come now."

Before I realized it, I was already being escorted into the shrine's administration office.

I don't think I put up much of a fight.

In one section of the office was a six tatami mat-sized room. The traditional sliding screen door was like the rest in the building, but upon entering, I could see it was a bedroom, full of personal belongings. There was a cabinet and an alarm clock, a bookshelf with novels and magazines, a small teapot, and in the center of it all, a low table. She probably had more stuff at her house, but it looked like this area was put aside for Juumonji to occupy.

Not to mention...
"H-huh? Oreki-san... Why are you..."

Chitanda was there, flustered. She looked around, frantically running her hands through her hair, and then, as if it suddenly dawned on her, she reached out and started gathering together everything on the low table. Juumonji started to speak, a hint of laughter in her voice.

"You don't really have to hide it, you know."

"A-ah, yes. I see. Now that you mention it, you do have a point."

She pointed her face downwards, probably trying to pull herself together a little, and then finally sat properly back up.

"Good afternoon, Oreki-san. Fancy meeting you here."

"Yeah. I was surprised."

"But you knew I was here, right?"

What the heck was she talking about?

"Oh, really?" asked Juumonji, as she turned to look at me. I shook my head.

"I said it though, didn't I?" interjected Chitanda. "I said that I promised Kaho-san that I'd visit her on Sunday."

"When and to whom did you say something like that?"

"I told Mayaka-san after school on Friday."

Why would she assume I'd know that from her telling Ibara? Right as I was about to ask her this myself, she seized away the initiative.

"Weren't you sitting right next to her?"

My memory was a bit hazy, but I feel like I did visit the clubroom that day, in which case, I may've very well been sitting next to Ibara then. Even still...

"I didn't hear it."

My denial wasn't very strong, so I had the sinking feeling that it sounded more and more like I had eavesdropped on their conversation and then purposely gone to the place where Chitanda had plans. I said it once more, this time with conviction.

"I heard absolutely nothing."

Chitanda readily nodded. "I understand. You were reading at the time, Oreki-san."

Juumonji let out an unconvinced hum from the side. I was a little worried she didn't believe me.

She then brought out a floor cushion for me to sit on and poured me a cup

of green tea. As she did that, Chitanda started to rearrange the things she had previously tried to hide back on top of the low table.

"I came to look at these."

They were photos—photos of the living doll festival that had taken place back in April, near Chitanda's house.

"It really is too embarrassing."

She started to hide them again.

In the living doll festival, Chitanda played one of those dolls and wore an intricate twelve-layered kimono. At her request, I played the umbrella bearer. Satoshi had taken pictures of the festival and showed them to me as well. The photos currently on the table, however, were different ones.

I was also embarrassed and wanted to hide them as fast as possible. My eyes wandered to a certain photo. Behind the doll-dressed Chitanda, whose gaze seemed to be looking slightly down with elegant composure, walked me in a traditional court hat... with the dumbest-looking expression on! My mouth was hanging wide open and my eyes looked dull and unfocused.
I subconsciously averted my gaze.

"That's one cruel picture."

"Ah, this one?" Chitanda pulled the photo in question closer to her. "It certainly isn't the best shot."

Juumonji placed her cup of tea on the low table and started to talk as she sat on the cushion. "You were yawning, huh. What miraculous timing on your part."

"More like nightmarish."

That face of mine wasn't from a yawn. If I had to guess... the photo had captured a moment of fascination. I didn't really see anything like that in Satoshi's pictures, so it's clear I wasn't making that expression the entire time. At least, that's what I wanted to believe.

"Sorry I dragged you in here like this, but I couldn't help but laugh when I saw this picture. I figured that if you weren't here, it'd be like laughing at you behind your back, and that left a bad taste in my mouth."

I got where she was coming from, but I doubt she looked at the picture intending on laughing at it from the start. What an upstanding person.

"By the way, this picture of Eru over here's pretty terrible, too."

"Kaho-san! That's off-limits!"

The two of them continued to talk on and on, laughing as they discussed the photos, and I quietly sat between them, slowly sipping my tea. Although Juumonji was the one who invited me to sit with them, I was definitely in the wrong spot. In other words, I desperately wanted out, though my parched throat did appreciate the tea.

I tried to wait for a lull in the conversation that I could use to say my goodbyes, but it was near-impossible to find. As I was doing this, I reached the bottom of my cup. I guess this was definitely a sign that I had to go, but as I thought this, Juumonji suddenly looked at the clock.

"It's already this late? You should probably get going soon, Eru."

Chitanda smiled. "Yes, I know. Have you finished with your errands?"

"Oh," said Juumonji as she froze. "Shoot. I was going to do it but saw Oreki-kun and got distracted."

I wasn't sure what they were talking about, but it sounded like it was my fault. Juumonji's brow furrowed slightly, and she lowered her head.

"I'm really sorry. I wonder if I can still make it..."

"What happened?" I asked.

To that, Chitanda responded, "Today, I was planning on showing Kaho-san these pictures and then helping her with something after."

Juumonji explained the rest. "I was also asked by my family to do some shopping. I left because there wasn't much time left, but then I got surprised when I saw you and ended up forgetting about it."

She was surprised? Not an ounce of it showed on her face.

"If that's the case, I'll take care of the preparations," Chitanda said. "You go on ahead, Kaho-san."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's not the first time I've done it."

"You're a lifesaver." As Juumonji said that, she closed her eyes and brought her hands together in prayer towards Chitanda. "*Namu.*"[7]

"That's Buddhist, isn't it?" I said before realizing it. Juumonji opened her eyes.

"It's a principle that goes beyond the boundaries of religion. Though, what'll you do now, Oreki-kun? I don't mind if you stay here."
"No, I think I'll excuse myself. Thanks for the tea."

"Really? Well, you're welcome."

As I was about to stand up, I suddenly thought of something.

"By the way, what are you going to help her with?"

Chitanda gestured with both arms as if doing some kind of dance.

"Cleaning!"

I guess she was imitating a broom-sweeping movement. Juumonji added on to that.

"We have a miniature shrine dedicated to Inari.[8] Though, it doesn't really have to be cleaned today."

"It's alright. I had intended on coming here to do it today anyways."

So essentially, one person was going to be doing a two-man cleaning job... I wish I hadn't heard.

As I did hear, there was no getting around it. I only had one option available to me.

"I'll help out."

At first surprised, Chitanda immediately said that I didn't need to. After that, however, she didn't reject my offer any further.

2.

Inari's shrine was located off to the side from the main hall of worship, at the end of a long, narrow trail.

Now that I think about it, there was a banner fluttering in the corner of the shrine's grounds, reading "High Ranking Shrine." I had no idea why it wasn't closer to the path.

"This doesn't make much sense. Would something like this attract worshippers?"

"I'm not sure... although I don't think the shrine was built here to gather followers."

I held two brooms, each one resting on a different shoulder. Chitanda carried a bucket. Inside it were damp rags, a dustpan, some trash bags, and working gloves.

"Let's go."

The narrow path started up as a small hill and quickly became a set of stairs. I felt like if I walked in front, I'd end up constantly poking her with the brooms, so I let her go first instead. As we started to climb, I turned around, thinking nothing in particular, and saw that the shrine grounds had already disappeared from view behind the many trees.

I had to say... it was all so peaceful.

Exactly as I thought this, however, I started to become conscious of all the sounds surrounding me. The rustling leaves, chirping birds, my footsteps, Chitanda's footsteps... My simple stroll had turned into something really strange.

"I'm sorry, Oreki-san. This has all turned into something really strange."

Hearing her mimic my thoughts startled me.

"Yeah, well, I had nothing to do today, anyway."

We wordlessly continued our ascent. The stairs were much steeper than they had initially appeared to be from the base, and I found myself focusing solely on my footing. Just as I was beginning to forget what we were talking about, she responded.

"How unusual."

It had felt like quite the journey from a physical standpoint, but in reality, it had probably only taken abound five or so minutes. This part of the mountain started to level off, and I finally saw a red torii gate and a miniature shrine behind it. There was a small stone pedestal in front of the shrine, and on it was a sake bottle. Although I figured no one would come to a place like this, I saw empty beer cans and cigarette butts lying scattered about.

I handed one of the brooms to Chitanda.

"What do we do for the cleaning?"

"The priest takes care of the actual shrine itself, so all we do is sweep up the leaves and so on."

"What's with the washcloth?"

"It's to wipe off the bird droppings and other things from the guardian fox statue and the torii gate. Although..." Chitanda trailed off. She did a figure-eight around the guardian fox statue and then smiled brightly at me. "It looks like it's okay. All we have to do is wipe the sake bottle."

Why is there even a bottle there in the first place? I'm guessing it wasn't that someone forgot about it...

"Okay, let's get to it."

Chitanda started to chuckle lightly. "Let's offer our greetings, first."

I see. We laid the brooms against the guardian fox statue and then stood before Inari, side-by-side. I brought my hands together. *Namu.*

If I remembered correctly, Inari blessed commerce. I think I read once that he was originally a god of agriculture. Or maybe it was Satoshi that told me that. At any rate, I didn't really have anything to do with either at the moment. Let's see... okay. Please forgive me in advance for the quick job I'm about to do in cleaning your shrine.

"Let's begin, then," said Chitanda.

It looked like she was going to start with the scrubbing. Since I had already gone through all the effort of bringing up the heavy brooms, I figured I might as well start by sweeping. Although we were in the wrong time of year for it, a surprising number of leaves had fallen and piled up on the ground for some reason. This'd probably be a pretty tedious job.

I began to sweep. I decided to first clear the area around the torii gate.

The rhythmic sound of the bristles scraping against the ground felt inexplicably pleasant to my ears.

Now that I think about it, I'd also done some cleaning just this morning. Why was I doing something like this again in a place like this, especially after taking the time to enjoy the sunshine?

Hm, hm, hm... I hummed with each sweeping stroke.

"You seem to be in a good mood, Oreki-san."

As she said this, I suddenly realized how loud I was being. As one might expect, I wanted to die from the embarrassment. I began to heat up. In a situation with no salvation like this one, I at least wanted to avoid showing any bewilderment.

"Not really," I ended up responding.

Chitanda covered her mouth with her hand as her shoulders started to shake.

She finished wiping the sake bottle and then put her gloves on. After she put all of the empty cans into the bucket, she then took the broom and started sweeping with me. We didn't plan out anything in advance, but I ended up taking the right side of the shrine whereas she worked on the left.

I swept in silence, taking special care to make sure my humming was the same. The sounds of our brooms were in synchronicity at times and at others, slightly off.

"I was a little surprised," Chitanda suddenly remarked. I listened without looking up.

"About what?"

"That you offered to help."

"Sometimes you just have to clean."

"Is that so?"

I thought for a second.

"Well, maybe except for when you have a test coming up or something else to do."

She replied, her voice cheery. "I'm the same before tests. I'm not confident at all."

I could hear a bird chirping in the distance.

"...Oreki-san, aren't you always saying that if something would resolve itself without you doing anything, then you'd rather not do anything about it? That's why I was a bit taken aback. I thought for sure you'd go home right away."

Well, I guess in the end, the cleaning wasn't as laborious as I thought it would be. I had nothing to do with it from the start, and I'm sure she would've been fine had I just wished her good luck and left then and there. In fact, normally I would've done just that.

I started to speak without stopping my hands.

"I'm not feeling well today."

"What? Are you hurting somewhere?"

"It's not that. It's just that—how can I put this—I'm not feeling like I usually do. I'm just feeling like I wanted to move around. If I wasn't helping you, I'd probably be taking a jog right now. It's good that I'm able to do something productive."

I glanced up at Chitanda and saw her tilting her head to the left and right in uncertainty. Finally, she spoke.

"Um, thank you very much."

I'm not exactly sure what she was thanking me for.

As I continued to move my arms, I started to feel the trickle of sweat. There was no wind within the forest. Possibly because the earth was damp from the prolonged rainfall, the dirt didn't budge all too well when my broom brushed over it, and thus the fallen leaves proved to be difficult to move. Naturally, I had to put more force into it. The broom seemed to be suffering under the pressure.

"Oreki-san."

"Hm?"

"Could I ask you a question?"

"Mhm."

What kind of question is it? It's probably too early in the year for it to be about the culture festival anthology.

There was a lull in the conversation as Chitanda seemed to be hesitating about something. She wouldn't say a thing. Hearing only the sound of her moving broom, I looked up and saw her sweeping the exact same spot continuously.

Getting irritated, I was about to ask her what she wanted to say when she finally opened her mouth and started to speak.

"Um... Please don't answer if you don't want to, but—"

"If it's about my grades, I'm not telling you. Yours are probably higher, anyway."

"No, that's not it."

There was a pause long enough to take a deep breath.

"Why are you always saying that thing you say?"

"That thing I say?"

"You know... 'If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, I'll make it quick.'"

Oh.

I stopped moving. The rhythmical sounds of the broom scraping on the soil halted.

Seemingly misinterpreting something I did, Chitanda quickly started to shake her hand in apology.

"Um, it's okay not to talk about it. That came out wrong. It's okay if you don't need to talk about it. Wait... did I say that correctly?"

A soft smile came across my face before I realized it.

"I know what you want to say."

I sighed.

"I was just wondering what I should say, is all. It's not a very interesting story, and there isn't much to it in the first place. It really just boils down to me not wanting to put work into anything."

"Really?"

I looked back on my memories. From between a gap in the trees, I peered

into the cloudless sky. To think I was going to answer a question like that... Today really was strange.

"Let's see..." I muttered, resuming my sweeping once more.

3.

Now, I'm not really saying this is the exact reason, nor am I even saying it's worth listening to in the first place, but it probably beats listening to me hum.

It happened back when I was in 6th grade. At my elementary school, everyone was assigned to be in charge of something or another. Oh, yours too? Then I guess it wasn't that strange after all.

Anyways, I was put in charge of something as well. At first they'd let us apply for the job we wanted, but if everything wasn't sorted through that, then it'd be put to a vote. I don't remember how it went exactly, but I ended up with the switching duty. I was basically like one of those people who worked at old phone companies. Huh? You don't get it? Um, maybe something like a phone operator... Well, just ask Satoshi to tell you about it later.

It was more or less just another school grounds job. For things like cleaning duties, there were things like the beautification committee, and so on. Basically, because they split up the entire class into different jobs, there had to be a job where they could assign whatever task still wasn't being taken care of. The one I got assigned to was—you better not laugh—watering the flower garden.

Now, I don't really know much about flowers. Even with their names, pretty much all I can remember is the pansy. Anyways, so this proved to be more of a hassle than I'd anticipated. I thought all I had to do was water them every day, but I was wrong. You probably know what I'm talking about. I also had to check the condition and dryness of the soil to see if I should give them water or not. There were three classes, and the watering was assigned to a different class each week. So essentially, I had to check the soil every day for one week every three weeks and water the flowers if they needed it. There was a lot to learn. Unlike doing the same thing every day, having to change your actions depending on your day-to-day discretion becomes a real pain.

I didn't do it alone. I was put into a team of two. The other person's name was... I wonder if it's okay to say it. Let's just say Tanaka for now. Hm? It was a girl. Everyone was put into boy-girl pairs.

Tanaka really didn't stand out all that much in class. So much so, that even someone like me, who wasn't really concerned with other people's lives in the classroom, knew about it. She was really withdrawn, and even if you tried to strike up a conversation with her, it'd end after only a few words. There definitely might've been something gloomy about her. Her hair? I feel like it was long. Not as long as yours though. Why? Is there something important about the hair?

Anyways, so Tanaka and I were both in charge of watering the flowers. For the first couple of weeks or so, there weren't really any issue. When it was our week to water, we'd go out to the shack behind the school after classes ended. Then we'd check the condition of the soil. Things would usually go something like me insisting that we water them and Tanaka saying it was still unnecessary. She'd tell me that it was actually bad to water them too much. She was the kind of girl that never really asserted herself, no matter the situation, so hearing that kind of firm resistance from her, even if it were softly worded, really shocked me at first. Even though it was only watering some flowers, I felt like it was my responsibility to not let them wither.

That said, this exchange of ours only lasted through the first week. We'd gotten used to the flower-watering fundamentals, so there wasn't really any need for the two of us to do the job at the same time. We started alternating turns. I figured that'd be for the best.

That didn't last, though. I wonder how much time passed before then. At a certain point, the situation changed. Tanaka had asked me for help.

"Because my house is being rebuilt, I'm going to have to live far away. It takes an hour to the city via the city bus. There aren't many of them running, and it'd be really bad if I missed it, so I want to leave right away, after school," she said.

I don't recall feeling too reluctant about it, but our class teacher ended up entering the mix as well. He tried to talk me into it.

"Tanaka is also in a difficult situation, so please try to see where she's coming from. Your house is pretty close, so being a little late shouldn't be too bad, right?"

That was correct. I do live pretty close to the elementary school. High school ended up being pretty far away, but I'll leave that for another time.

This teacher was a young man who'd been an instructor for only three years, if I remember correctly. He was pretty zealous. He was always trying to improve the classroom somehow and kept on doing various things to revise it.

Like...

"Oreki, could you stick some tape on the ground so it'll be easier to reposition the tables?"

Or...

"Oreki, I want to make the class bulletin larger, so could you go ahead and cut this paper?"

And...

"Oreki, I feel like the ceiling light has gotten a little dim, so could you be careful and take it down?"

Are you surprised? I don't blame you. He always used to tell me to do various things. Thinking back on it, that kind of thing might've been one of his teaching tenets. Anyways, usually, after I finished up with the garden and returned to the near-empty classroom, he'd often be waiting there to get to me to do something or other. It goes without saying that I'd always say yes, no questions asked. That was something that became pretty common after I entered 6th grade. I guess it did depend on the person, though.

He knew about Tanaka's circumstances and asked me to take care of her portion of the work. I said that I would. The next week, I was in charge of the gardens, I did everything myself, every day of the week. At first, Tanaka would say, "Sorry, and thanks," but you'll get used to everything over time,

I suppose. After a while, she started to simply leave without saying anything beforehand, though I didn't think poorly of her because of it. I understood what she was going through. Having to walk all the way to the bus station and then enduring an hour-long ride back would be really difficult.

That was the first part. Is there anything you didn't understand so far? I'm not really used to telling stories like this.

Good. Then I'll keep going.

One day, it happened.

Tanaka and I were headed towards the flower garden during our lunch break. We had been asked to plant some seeds in the corner by our teacher. I forgot what kind of seeds they were. It was right before summer, so they might've been morning glories. No, I'm serious, I don't remember.

He also told us to stick in some signs with the flowers' names on them. Now that I mention it, that was probably his own idea. What that meant was that his "education environment improvement" goals weren't limited to his class alone. There were a lot of signs, and they were difficult to carry, even for the two of us. We also had to bring the seeds, so there was a bit of an issue. I ended up putting the seeds in my pocket. As long as I wrapped them with some paper, there'd be no problem. Tanaka, on the other hand, was trying to hold the seeds between her fingers while she carried the signs, and, as you might imagine, it ended up not working out.

"Put them in your pockets," I said, naturally. It worked for me, after all. Tanaka, however, shook her head.

"I don't have pockets."

For a while after she told me that, I became under the impression that girl clothes simply didn't have pockets in general. In reality, it was because I never really had the chance to check it for myself.

We didn't talk all that much. Although we shared the same job, Tanaka

hadn't actually done any work for it in a while, so we had nothing to talk about. First, we planted the flower seeds, and then we took a look at the signs and immediately fell at a loss. Neither Tanaka nor I remembered the names of the flowers. Let's just say we were never taught them in the first place. Because of that, we weren't able to finish setting up the signs, and our lunch break was completely wasted on something or other.

And then came after school.

That week was our class's turn to take care of the flower garden. However, as I had already checked the soil while planting the seeds, I decided that there was no need to water it. I probably should've gone home early at that point, but I instead stayed and messed around. I'm pretty sure I was talking with my friends in class. That's when Tanaka walked in. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"My backpack's missing," she said.

It was a backpack. How could something that big go missing, I thought, but it's not like saying that would magically make it appear again. We briefly searched the room, and once we were certain it was missing, I proposed we go to the teacher for help. It was 6th grade, after all. Kids were starting to grow up. There were kids who absolutely hated talking to the teacher, no matter what the situation, but Tanaka quickly agreed.

The three of us searched wherever we could think of. Who searched? It was Tanaka, the teacher, and me. Oh yeah, the friends I was talking to, right? I wonder what happened to them. I don't remember them being with us, so they probably ran off right away.

The teacher was really desperate. I didn't realize it then, but thinking back on it, he was probably suspecting it. What do you mean, what? I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. You don't? I see. That it was bullying. He probably didn't actually believe that she was being bullied and that her backpack was hidden by someone. I had my own idea of what was going on and was looking for it as fast as possible.

Don't give me that look. It turned out that it wasn't bullying after all. It was by the pilotis... Don't you know what those are? It’s like a recreational area,

or an open area, or whatever you call it. Anyways, we had one of those at our school, and Tanaka was playing there after classes ended when she set her backpack down. What happened apparently was some first or second grader walked by and delivered it to the lost-and-found in the faculty room out of the kindness of his heart. That's all it was. Unfortunately, the head teacher, the one who received it, had to leave for a bit to take care of something, so for a while, no one knew that the backpack was a lost item. It was all just a simple misunderstanding.

Honestly speaking, I was relieved. Although Tanaka and I had only talked with each other through our shared job, I felt as if I absolutely had to help her find it.

When the head teacher finally returned with the backpack, I was really happy.

He didn't forget to lecture her as well. "It's inexcusable to leave something important like this alone!", or something like that. I had also taken my backpack off to play countless times before, so I felt the problem lay more with the younger student who had carelessly assumed it was a lost item. Of course, I didn't say any of that.

As he was scolding her like that, Tanaka sat there, fidgeting nervously the entire time. I could understand what she was feeling. If you think about it, she hadn't even been able to confirm if its contents were safe yet. She probably wanted to check inside it as soon as possible. On that subject, our teacher was a little more thoughtful. He waited for a pause in the head teacher's rant and interjected with a quick conclusion.

"The head teacher's exactly right. Though, you should check to see if everything's safe in there."

As Tanaka was handed the bag, all of her usual silence seemed to be kicked out of the door as she lunged for it. She eagerly twisted the knob to open the top and pulled out a pencil case. I think it was a pretty small one. The design was really plain.

Upon spotting the mechanical pencil inside it, she heaved a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness...!"

I only caught a small glimpse of it, but it was one of those mechanical pencils that had a little character on top of it. Which character was it, again...? She told me about it sometime later, but it was one of those things you could win from magazine contests. It was probably pretty cheap, but, you know, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It was probably her treasure. Tanaka looked truly happy.

So I asked, "Is everything inside okay?"

She gripped the mechanical pencil in her hand and responded, "As long as I have this, it's okay for now. I'll check the rest when I get home."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, thanks."

There was nothing wrong with bringing a mechanical pencil to an elementary school, of course. The whole thing with character figure mechanical pencils being banned in schools hadn't even been brought up yet at that moment as well. Unfortunately for Tanaka, however, the head teacher ended up noticing it.

"It's inexcusable to bring something valuable like that to school," he said angrily. If you think about it, though, textbooks were much, much more valuable. According to his logic, you should only bring things you wouldn't mind losing to school... Am I just arguing for argument's sake?

The next day, the school sent out a notice banning all stationery with character designs on them. It came completely out of the blue. Notebooks, erasers, desk pads... all sorts of character ornamented goods were dragged into the problem. They all had to be replaced, and it caused a huge fuss. Out of all of the students, it was probably only Tanaka and I who actually knew the truth behind the reason why.

Well, that's pretty much it.

I was also pretty shocked at this turn of events. I think that around then was

the moment when I first started to say "If I don't have to do it, I won't."

4.

"Huh?"

Chitanda paused. Impressive. She didn't even twitch.

She continued to stand frozen in place, possibly trying to go through the story once more in her head. She'd probably fall right over if I nudged her, but I went back to work instead. I made quite a lot of progress during that long story. All that was left was to pick up the fallen leaves with the dustpan and stuff them in the trash bags. That final step proved to be a little more annoying that I'd initially thought.

The dustpan was still in the bucket that Chitanda brought. As I took a step, about to go get it, she finally spoke up.

"Huh?"

"There's nothing 'huh' about it."

"I heard the entire story, right?"

"I hope so."

"Wasn't that ending a little weird?"

Well, I guess it was a little.

"Oreki-san, you helped Tanaka-san search for her backpack, right? You then managed to find it, and her precious mechanical pencil was safe inside, and then after that, goods with character designs were banned from your elementary school, right?"

Exactly. I picked up the dustpan.

I heard a loud clap.

"Ah, I got it!"

"Oh yeah?"

"You must've had a lot of character goods yourself, Oreki-san. When they were all banned, it came as a huge shock to you. Wait... But what does that have to do with 'If I don't have to do it, I won't'?"

She started to tilt her head left and right once more. She moved the broom as if deep in thought, and then finally timidly followed her theory up.

"Maybe...because the character goods ended up being banned, you regretted ever helping her from the start? Was that what you were thinking?"

Not bad. If I tried hard at anything, I would only be making more trouble for myself in the end. That's where she was going with this, huh?

Unfortunately...

"That's wrong."

"But—!"

"Don't stop cleaning."

"O-okay."

Chitanda was also more-or-less finished with her side of the shrine. Though there weren't many leaves left, the pile was pretty huge.

I started to use the dustpan first. As I was collecting the leaves, I started to speak.

"You always start talking from the conclusion first. I just wanted to give you a taste of your own medicine."

"You're terrible! You really did leave out parts of the story, Oreki-san!"

"Yeah."

Hearing that was music to my ears.

I really wasn't feeling well today. Even though there was clearly a better

way to tell that story, for some reason, I just didn't feel like doing it. Seeing the distressed Chitanda, well, it made me feel once more that doing this kind of thing every now and then might not seem that bad. It was a completely faultless way to kill time. Thanks to it, even the cleaning itself felt brief.

"Let's see..." Chitanda mused, placing a finger on her lips. Staying silent would probably be a bit too cruel, so I gave her a little help.

"The whole thing with the banned goods with character designs was kind of just an afterthought. It doesn't really have anything to do with the rest of the story."

She stared at me with huge, upturned eyes. "Wait... were you teasing me?"

"Something like that."

"O-Oreki-san!"

I put the leaves I collected into the bag. Although I'd supposedly cleaned up such a large area, after I stuffed it all inside, the resulting amount looked pitifully small. It felt like I was only cleaning up dirt.

"Don't get so angry. My elementary school self immediately realized it was strange. You shouldn't have a difficult time figuring it out, either."

"That doesn't help me..." she said as she hung her head. "You and I are different, Oreki-san. I just can't do that kind of reasoning. I don't know why."

I guess she was aware of it as well...

I didn't mean for this to turn into some kind of harassment. Besides, maybe I didn't tell the story well enough.

"Okay, first, Tanaka and I were doing our shifting job. I explained that thoroughly, right?"

"Right."

Chitanda started to lean forward and nodded. Her expression was dead serious. I kind of had the feeling I did something terrible to her.

"Halfway through, Tanaka couldn't stick around after school anymore. Because of that, I had to take care of the plants every day for a week when it was our class's turn to do it."

"Right." As if trying to hammer in the fact that she had properly listened, she added, "She was living in a much farther place because her house was being rebuilt. It took an hour."

"That's the part I'm talking about."

Chitanda had a great memory. Although I didn't mention that detail, I definitely hadn't forgotten about it either.

"I believe I said something about exactly what took an hour and from where."

"Right. It took one hour from the station by bus."

"Good. Specifically..."

"You said the city bus."

"How was she planning on getting on it?"

It looked like Chitanda finally realized it for herself. Her expression took on a surprised look, and she covered her mouth with both her hands. Her broom rested under her arm. She was pretty good at doing that.

"Oh, I figured it out. Tanaka-san couldn't return home. The clothes she wore that day didn't have pockets, after all."

"That's right."

"In order to ride the bus, you'd need money or a ticket. If you couldn't carry either of those on your person, you'd have to put it in your backpack."

I nodded emphatically.

"That's right. I thought it was a bit strange from the start. At first, I thought that the teacher had asked me to help find it so she could get on the bus, but why was she playing when she lost it after school in the first place? I figured that she was having fun while giving herself enough time to catch the bus, so I was really desperate to find it for her in time.

"When she got it back, however, the only thing important to her in it was the mechanical pencil with the little character on top. I even asked her if she was sure that that was the only important thing she needed to check for, but she couldn't think of anything else."

"What does that mean?"

We'd gotten this far and she still couldn't figure it out?

Well, I guess I couldn't blame her. Even I didn't want to believe it at the time.

"The only conclusion I could draw was that Tanaka didn't actually need to take the bus."

"How could..."

Speechless, Chitanda's eyes opened wide.

"I don’t think that was actually the case at the start. When she initially asked me to take care of the watering duty, she might've actually had to take the hour-long bus ride. At the very least, however, her situation was different that day. A simple mechanical pencil took precedence over her means to get home. The reason being: Tanaka no longer needed to take the bus."

"The construction work on her house had already finished? Then why didn't she..."

"Isn't it obvious?"

I sighed.

"She pushed all the job onto me so she could skip out on work."

Chitanda spoke as she gathered the leaves with the dustpan.

"So that's what happened. You hated being lied to, so you started to say 'If I don't have to do it, I won't.'"

That wasn't really it.

I guess my storytelling really wasn't good, after all. That wasn't the case at all.

What happened from that point on wasn't a very pretty story. I knew, as well, that it wasn't the kind of thing you could just tell anyone.

Chitanda had gone a little too far with her assumptions, though. Could I remain silent after the last part of the story being misunderstood like that?

"No," I interjected. "That day, I realized that Tanaka didn't have any money or tickets for the bus. My first reaction was to immediately look at our teacher. In the first place, he was the one who told me to do all of that hard work by myself because Tanaka's house was being rebuilt, after all. He'd notice if there was something strange about that situation. If he found out, he'd immediately start scolding her, right...? But he didn't."

Chitanda looked at my reasoning with eyes tinged with suspicion.

"Doesn't that just mean he hadn't figured it out?"

That'd be much more preferable.

"No, he had a crazy expression on. You could see the 'Shit, I messed up' written all over it. Because of that, I was able to confirm that her house's construction had indeed already been finished at that point."

"..."

"So then why didn't he tell me? Why didn't everything go back to how it

was on the first day of our switching duty?

"It could've just been that I had some sort or persecution complex. He could've just forgotten for all I knew. But on that day, when I saw that expression of his, one thing went through my head... It was because I always did everything that was asked of me without a word of complaint. It was because I was so convenient in that sense that he didn't bother to do anything about someone else pushing their work onto me."

I propped myself up with the broom, as if it were a cane, and continued.

"I then thought a little more about it. You know, the construction on Tanaka's house didn't even have anything to do with me in the first place, right? Maybe it was through some kind of mistake of mine that I ended up with the responsibility to do Tanaka's share of the work for her? That's not right. Tanaka's business was hers alone. I had nothing to do with any of it.

"Though, I guess we were technically classmates and job partners. Maybe it was good for us to help each other out. I mean, just watering the flower garden wasn't really that much work. It's true that my house was close by, so it was probably fine to help someone in need...

"...These kinds of thoughts, I realized, were the reason I was taken advantage of."

All Tanaka did was seize the opportunity.

After that incident, I started to realize there were two kinds of people: those who knew how the world worked and pushed everything they didn't want to do on others and those who happily accepted being on the receiving end of the former’s actions. When I entered 6th grade—no, when I grew old enough to understand my surroundings, I started to realize that I was one of the latter. As I did, all my memories started to flood back, one-by-one. That time, that time, and that time too... so that's what was happening.

How about when I was told to bring the heavy, one-liter container of salad dressing on our class daytrip? When the school was on the verse of stopping classes temporarily due to an influenza outbreak, was there anyone else besides me who had to visit countless houses to deliver all of the sick

students' classwork? When we accidently broke a window during a game of kickball, was the reason I went to the principal's office alone to apologize on everyone's behalf and instead got chewed out by our teacher because I was the leader? No. It was because I never talked back.

That in itself was fine, really. None of the things I did were unmanageable. It wasn't like I considered me doing those kind of stuff some sort of loss, and I didn't hate them for constantly taking it easy.

It's just that imagining myself being used like a convenient tool made me sad.

I thought back.

At that time, my discovery made me so sad, and it was getting too painful to keep silent about it, so I told my older sister.

Even if you think that fellow human beings should help each other, others won't necessarily think of you as being worth it. It's not like I wanted anyone to appreciate me. I just never imagined that people thought of me as such an idiot. I won't stay after school anymore. As long as I'm around others, they'll ask me to do something. They probably think I'm an idiot because I always did what they asked without resisting. I don't care about what they think. I just hate being used. Of course, if I have to do it I will. I won't complain at all. But, if it's not necessary... If it turns out it's someone else's responsibility... If I don't have to do it, I won't. I absolutely won't.

My sister listened to this unspecific story of mine, and placed her hand atop my head as she spoke.

Yeah. Even though you're so awkward, you always want to be useful. Even though you're such an idiot, some strange part of you is so smart you've picked up such a nasty outlook. That's fine then. I won't stop you. There shouldn't be anything wrong with that, right? I don't think anything you're saying is incorrect.

I wonder what she said after that. I felt like she said a little more. That's right. If I remember correctly...

From now on, you should go on a long holiday. It'll be for the best. Take it

nice and easy. It's okay. Even if, while you're resting, you can't change yourself fundamentally—

"—ki-san."

I must've ended up getting lost in thought. I hadn't realized Chitanda was calling out to me.

"Uh, sorry. What were you saying?"
Chitanda's face was right before me. Her massive eyes stared into mine.

"You were sad, weren't you, Oreki-san?"

I turned away and smiled.

"It wasn't that bad. All it was, was a case of a sulking boy who ended up with nowhere to turn."

It was such an ingrained habit of mine, that I imagined it was difficult to adopt a new motto like that. If I don't have to do it, I won't.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Chitanda gripping her broom with both hands. Without so much as looking away, she said something completely out of the blue.

"I've been thinking, though, Oreki-san... About the 'you' in your story and the 'you' standing here right now... I was thinking they might actually not be that different after all."

I wanted to laugh off her statement.

But nothing came out.

Chitanda took a step away. She bent over and picked up the trash bag stuffed with fallen leaves.

"Thank you very much. Thanks to you, this place looks really nice now."

"Yeah."

"Kaho-san will probably bring out some tea and snacks for us. Would you like relax with us for a little while longer?"

I smiled softly and waved my hand to decline. Please spare me from another moment of sitting between those two.

"Nah. Hand me that broom. I'll take it back with me."

I took it from her and rested each one on a different shoulder. I turned around as to not hit her with the end and then started talking with my back turned.

"Give Juumonji my regards. I'll be going now."

I started to descend down the stairs, assaulted by the shadows of the foliage above. The sound of the leaves rustling in the wind softly reached my ears. It looked like this rare, beautiful day hasn't given up on me yet. The laundry will probably be already dry by the time I get back.

As I was leaving, I heard Chitanda's voice.

"Oreki-san! Thank you for telling me your story! I'm really happy that you did!"

It'd be too much of a hassle to turn around with the heavy brooms on my person, so I just pretended I didn't hear her in the first place. If I don't have to do it, I won't. Oh, would you look at that. Even though today was such a strange day, coming here was all it took to return me back to normal. I scratched my head.

I then suddenly remembered. I remembered the rest of what my sister said at that moment, as she violently ruffled around my hair.

—I'm sure someone will end your holiday for you.

6 - Even Though I'm Told I Now Have Wings

1.

The long season of rain had ended, and only a single petal-like cloud floated in the night sky, illuminated by the crescent moon. The breeze that entered the room was warm, despite the time of night, and seemed to herald the coming of summer. Although I became aware of the house lights scattered about in the distance, I continued to press the organ's keys, my eyes scanning a sheet of music.

I memorized the basic progression of notes that flowed out and then proceeded to slowly hum the tune. I felt a little embarrassed when imagining how far this "la-la-la" melody of mine might carry through a night this silent, and my voice became soft.

As if drowning in the sound myself, I hummed the same song countless times. At last, I had become nearly satisfied with the accuracy of my pitch and took a deep breath, intending to add the lyrics on my next attempt.

At that moment, a voice called to me from the other side of the sliding door.

"Eru."

It was my father.

It was incredibly rare for him to come all the way to my room to call for me. Perhaps the organ, or maybe my humming, had been too loud. I timidly responded.

"Yes?"

"Come to the shrine room."

As usual, his voice was serious, but he didn't appear to be angry. I was relieved, yet all the more struck by how mysterious it was. The shrine room was often used when there was something important to discuss, but I couldn't possibly imagine what there was to talk about.

“I’ll be there shortly.”

The sound of footsteps faded away. It seemed that today’s practice was complete. I closed the lid of the organ and shut the window.

Suddenly, as I left my room, I became inexplicably hesitant. What exactly was it that he wanted to talk about? For no particular reason, I felt a terrible apprehension.

—Maybe I could just continue to hum instead?

Even thoughts like these passed through my head at that moment.

Of course I couldn’t. As I approached the moment of truth, I somehow managed to steel my nerves a little. I smiled as I thought about my earlier moment of panic and turned off the lights in my room. Beyond the window, across which the curtains had not been closed, a small cloud drifted in front of the moon.

2.

After completing their finals, solely waiting for the start of summer break, all of Kamiyama High School had been enveloped by an atmosphere of lethargy; the Earth Sciences lecture room was no exception. That said, it's not like I could really say that this kind of atmosphere wasn't the norm from the start. I had the feeling that it was the first time in a long while that all four members were gathered in the clubroom at the same time.

Each of us sat in whichever seat we wanted, in a room that could fit an entire class. That said, it wasn't like any of us were that far apart from another. We all tended to sit somewhat close to the center.

Chitanda and I were silently reading. My book was about a ninja, a princess, and their illegitimate child; their story consisted entirely of a rapid succession of major incidents, all completely devoid of any subtle literary workings or underpinnings, with each chapter simply showing someone getting into some kind of pinch or another. There wasn't a single difficult aspect about it—a truly pleasant read. For a mind like mine, one that had been ravaged by tests, I can say it was an undeniably perfect fit.

I had no idea what Chitanda was reading. It was a large book abundant with photos, so I assumed it might be something like a travel guide, but I couldn't see it very well from where I was sitting, nor did I really even make the effort to do so. At any rate, it didn't appear to be very interesting as even Chitanda herself stared vacantly at its pages.

Ibara and Satoshi were scribbling over and over all over an open notebook and talking about who-knows-what with each other… But as I paused between my chapters and peeked at the two, it appeared that Ibara was the one leading the discussion. With a pen in her hand and a conflicted expression, she spoke.

"It's the hand. The problem has to be the hand," she muttered.

Satoshi nodded, as if in complete agreement. "I see, the hand, huh?"

"This guy can't use his right hand... Actually, if I could draw it like it was a

psychological thing—that he didn't want to use it instead—that could set up some good foreshadowing."

"I see, foreshadowing, huh?"

It appeared they were outlining the plot to a manga.

Ever since Ibara had left the manga research society, she hadn't shown any reserve with regards to drawing manga. Simply put, maybe because both Chitanda and I had known about her creations, there wasn't any point in feeling embarrassed or trying to hide it. Or perhaps quitting the manga society had caused something within her to change.

Ever since the beginning, it had been decided that Chitanda would inherit her family's business. With Ibara also being resolute in her passions, only Satoshi's and my pathetic indecision was brought to the fore. What a troubling situation.

...No, the two of us were normal. These 11th graders with absolutely no uncertainty regarding their future pursuits—these two girls who only wanted to refine their beloved skills—they were the strange ones.

"It'd be fine if I made someone ask him 'What happened to your hand?' but he's alone in this scenario. Looking at your own hand and then breaking out into some sort of self-deprecating speech feels so forced too... What should I do...?"

"I see, alone, huh?"

As he listened with a huge grin, Satoshi added only this.

"What do you do when you're alone?"

"What do I do... um..."

Without even acknowledging him, Ibara crossed her arms and glared up at the ceiling. Finally, her eyes suddenly sparkled and she spoke up.

"I see! Nice job Fuku-chan, that's it! I didn't have to think very hard about

it after all. Why did I try to make it so complicated? All I have to do is make him drink some coffee. He'll try to hold the coffee in his right hand, but in the next panel do it with his left instead. Yeah, that's natural, that's what I'll do."

I had no clue what was going on, but it looked like she thought up a nice idea. Ibara drew some broad strokes in the notebook, and then finally closed it with an emphatic "Okay!"

"Did you finish the first step?"

"For the most part. I can't start drawing yet, but with this, I think I can basically visualize the completed product."

"Good to hear."

And then Satoshi added, "This time, at least tell me what kind of story it will be."

So he had essentially been offering remark after remark to her monologue without knowing what kind of story it was. I didn't know whether I should've been disappointed in him or simply impressed.

Perhaps relieved after overcoming that hurdle, Ibara spoke with somewhat less enthusiasm than before.

"Speaking of coffee, something strange happened to me a while back."

"Oh really?"

"I went to an art supplies shop in Kiryuu, but..."

"Kiryuu? Why would you go that far?!"

Although Satoshi was the one that interrupted her story, I understood where he was coming from. Kiryuu was the northernmost part of this city and even by car took up to twenty minutes to reach from Kamiyama High School. From Ibara's house, it could take an hour at worst. There should be at least one art supplies store nearby. With a somewhat irritated expression, she responded.

“Yeah, the thing is... there’s an old tone that I can only get at that shop. I don’t use it much, but it was just in case.”

“Huh, I see.”

What on earth is a tone? I suppose I could at least guess that it was something used when drawing a manga. I wasn’t really interested in eavesdropping any more so I decided to return to my book, only to notice that my wristwatch nearing 5:00. If I were to start a new chapter now, I undoubtedly wouldn't be able to finish it before the school gates close. I decided to save it for when I return home and closed the book. Possibly noticing my movements, Ibara turned to face me.

“Oreki, listen to this, too.”

“I already am.”

“Oh yeah? So, after I finished shopping, I ended up getting really thirsty and decided to go to a nearby café since finals had just ended and all. Apparently they had really good coffee, so I got that, and, like, it had this weird taste. I wonder why.”

“I’m imagining you getting coffee in a café. You’re just like Houtarou.” Satoshi suppressed a laugh.

Ibara grumpily puffed out her cheeks. “It was research, just research! Hey, I was able to think of something good because of it, wasn’t I?”

“I know, I know. So? Why was the taste weird?”

Although it was essentially an obligation to Satoshi, I had gone to cafes several times. It wasn’t to the extent that I could appreciate the subtle differences between different types of coffee, but I could at least distinguish a good one from a bad one. That said, for the life of me, I couldn’t imagine what a weird-tasting coffee might taste like.

Ibara dismissingly waved her hand in front of her face. “Oh, by ‘weird taste,’ I was talking about the sugar.”

I was becoming more and more confused. Sugar is sweet; that much doesn't change. Satoshi looked confused as well, but he eventually broke out into a smile.

"I understand. It was sour, right?"

"...Fuku-chan, you're making fun of me, aren't you."

"I'm just having a little fun."

Ibara glared at his nonchalant smile for a little bit, but then finally let out a small sigh. "That's not it. It was sweet."

"Wasn't it normal then?" Satoshi and I unexpectedly responded at the same time.

Ibara slammed her fist down on the desk with a thud. "We're having this discussion right now because I'm saying it wasn't!"

Yes ma'am.

Ibara glared at the both of us as if to make sure our mouths were thoroughly glued shut and then continued. "It wasn't just sweet, it was *extremely* sweet. I've never had anything like it other than those over-sweetened canned coffees, so I was really surprised."

"Didn't you just put too much in?" I replied, and then, as if apologizing for not giving enough information, she abruptly nodded her head.

"Let's see. Starting from the beginning, I ordered a coffee and cake set. It was a lemon cake and honestly not that sweet, in my opinion. They asked me if I wanted milk and sugar and I told them that I did. The coffee that the server brought out had the milk in it already, and then there were two sugar cubes placed on the saucer. I took one sip and thought it was pretty normal, so I added one cube and tasted it again and… well... it was basically sugar water at that point."

Satoshi nodded gently. "So, it was a sugar cube, huh... If they gave you a small bowl of sugar and a spoon, I could understand why it might be too sweet; you might've simply added too much in that case."

“It was quite shocking for a single sugar cube to turn it that sweet, so I couldn’t help but think it was strange. I’ve been thinking about it a lot since then, but nothing else was out of the ordinary.”

Satoshi crossed his arms and tilted his head in thought. “Hmm, overly sweet sugar, huh?“

“Right? It’s strange, right?”

“It is, but that’s not to say I can’t think of a reason why.”

Ibara leaned forward. “Really?”

Satoshi nodded solemnly. “There are sweeteners that are hundreds—no, thousands—of times sweeter than sugar. If you added as much of them as you would normal sugar, of course you’d get something ridiculously sweet.”

“Hmph!” Ibara gave a single dissatisfied grunt and then continued with a wary expression. “Sure it was really sweet, but, just like I said earlier, it wasn’t as undrinkable as canned coffee is for me. And besides, have you ever seen a shop that gives you sweetener in the shape of a sugar cube?”

“No, I haven’t. I can’t even imagine something like that existing.”

Then why did you even mention it?

“Maybe it was some kind of strong tasting sugar. For example, it used a different manufacturing process, or maybe it came from a difference source.”

Satoshi uncrossed his arms and turned his head to look at Chitanda.

“Hey, Chitanda-san. Do you have any idea?”

“Huh?” Chitanda, who had been absentmindedly reading a book, raised her head as if suddenly being brought back to reality by Satoshi’s question. “Uh, about what?”

Our voices had been fairly loud while we were talking, however it appeared that not an ounce of it reached her ears. With a large grin, Satoshi responded. “Mayaka was talking about how she went to a café and did this and that, and how they brought out some sugar cubes for her. We were thinking that there might’ve been something special about it that made it sweeter than normal sugar. Don’t you know a lot about different kinds of foods?”

“Oh, that’s what it was.”

Chitanda closed the book in her hands and smiled, but I suddenly felt an unsettling discomfort from her expression. From the very beginning, she was a reserved person. She didn’t smile wide, get angry, or say anything bluntly. And yet, even after ruling that out, her current smile looked stiff, almost like it was manufactured.

Chitanda responded in a soft voice. “Unfortunately, I’m not sure. We don’t grow sugarcane or sugar beet.”

“I see. I was thinking you might’ve produced it at some point.”

She immediately casted her eyes downwards, only slightly.

“I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Gotcha. My bad, my bad. Sorry for asking such a strange question. I wonder what the deal with the sweet sugar is then. It’s surprisingly difficult to solve. I’m a little curious.”

“Yes, I wonder.”

Judging by how she responded, since she couldn’t enter the conversation, it seemed she was thinking about something else after all.

Ibara stared at me as if trying to say something. If I had to guess, it was probably something along the lines of “Doesn’t Chi-chan look a little off? Do you know anything?” I shook my head to add an “I have no idea.”

Our unspoken conversation created an awkward silence during the break in discussion. As if trying to salvage the conversation, Satoshi spun around to

face me and asked a question. “What do you think, Houtarou? Do you think it was a special type of sugar after all?”

Listening to the conversation, a thought did in fact cross my mind at one point. I didn’t see any real need to bring it up as long as I wasn’t asked, but now that I have been, I didn’t see any real need to keep quiet about it either.

“I don’t think it’s as difficult as you’re making it out to be,” I responded.

“Wait, really?” Satoshi looked astonished.

On the other hand, Ibara’s eyes came alive. “What do you mean? Weren’t you listening? I didn’t see anything other than a normal sugar cube.”

“Then it was probably just a normal sugar cube.”
“Was it that my taste was off after all?”

“I thought you were insisting that wasn’t the case.” I scratched my head. “Didn’t you mention it earlier—what happened to the coffee that the server brought for you?”

Satoshi responded immediately. “She said that the saucer had two sugar cubes on it.”

“That’s right, but I’m not talking about the sugar cubes.”

Both Ibara and Satoshi became quiet as puzzled expressions appeared on their faces. I glanced at Chitanda out of the corner of my eye, and while it seemed she was listening somewhat, she stared blankly as if she had no idea I just asked a question.

“Ibara. When you ordered the coffee, what did the shopkeeper ask you?”

“I already told you. They asked if I wanted milk and sugar.”

“Was that was they said, word-for-word?”

Ibara looked down as if retracing her memories and then finally shook her head. “I can’t remember it very well.”

“I might’ve sounded a bit harsh when I asked that, sorry. It’s only natural to forget something like that. I was just thinking that maybe they asked, ‘Would you like us to add milk and sugar?’”

She nodded.

“But I had taken a sip and then added the sugar cube because I thought it was too bitter. That shouldn’t have been the case if the sugar was in it from the very beginning.”

“You’d think so. By the way, what did you do after you put in the sugar cube?”

“I drank it.”

“No, I mean before that.”

“I had the lemon cake, but—”

“I’m not talking about that.”

Chitanda, who had been merely listening up until that point, timidly began to speak.

“Umm... Maybe what Oreki-san’s talking about is the fact that you mixed it.”

Hearing that, Satoshi immediately spoke up. “Oh, that’s it!” He turned to Ibara and continued enthusiastically. “That’s right. The coffee that Mayaka drank had sugar in it from the very beginning, but the problem was that it had sunk to the bottom, so you didn’t taste any sweetness. After you mixed in the sugar cube on top of that—”

Ibara also exclaimed with the realization. “I see. It had the potency of two sugar cubes mixed into it at once.”

“Yeah, that does seem pretty likely. That has to be it.”

After saying that, Satoshi nodded with deep satisfaction and then turned to

smile at me.

“I gotta say, you’re quite the armchair detective, aren’t you?”

It’s not like I came up with anything ingenious… It could probably just be chalked up as a lapse of memory from the involved party—Ibara.

But, Ibara, on the other hand, hesitantly responded: “Yeah... I guess it does make sense, but... my memory is hazy; I get the feeling that I can’t say with 100% certainty that that’s the answer. I feel like maybe I should go one more time to confirm it.”

Considering that the cafe was next to the art supplies store she frequented, she’d probably have the chance to go again in the future. At any rate, there was nothing more we could do with the information we had. Thinking it was about time to go home, I began to pack away my paperback.

At that moment, Satoshi suddenly piped up. “Let’s go to confirm it then.”

As I proceeded to wish the two of them good luck on their travels...

“We have to start working on the anthology after all,” he continued.

“That’s true. You do have a point there.”

“Right?”

In order to prepare for the eventual culture festival, we certainly did not need to travel all the way outside the city; staying at the school would suffice. At the same time, however, a trip to a cafe to resolve the mystery behind the overly sweet sugar wouldn’t necessarily be a bad idea. I refrained from reacting.

All I said was, “It would get too late if we left now.”

The clock on the wall read 5:40.

“That’s a good point. Then tomorrow“—he paused—”actually I’m busy then. I have student council business.”

Tomorrow was the end-of-term ceremony. Being a member of the general council, Satoshi likely had stuff to do.

“Will the day after tomorrow work?”

Not that I cared, but doing preparation work on the first day of summer break would be quite diligent of us. Ibara didn’t seem to have any objections either. Just as I assumed it would be a done deal, Chitanda spoke in a small voice almost like a whisper.

“I’m sorry. I’ll be preoccupied that day.”

Ibara’s face suddenly changed. “Ah, that’s right. I forgot.”
Neither Satoshi nor I had said a thing, but a stiff, impermeable atmosphere suddenly overtook the room. Ibara faced us then continued.

“Chi-chan’s performing in the choir festival,” she said.

“So that’s what it was. I guess that day won’t work then.”

Satoshi nodded, seemingly convinced, but I was left confused. This school had been feverishly enhanced with event after event, starting with the culture festival, but I had never once heard of the choir festival.

“They put on something like that over summer break? Do they have it in the gym?”

I received two cold stares in response.

“Of course not.”

“It’s an event hosted by the city.”

So it wasn’t a school activity. I guess that only makes sense; no matter how much I averted my gaze from the energy on this campus, there was no way I’d go without even knowing an event existed. What a relief.

“It’s called the Ejima Choir Festival, named after Sandou Ejima, a famous

composer from Kamiyama city. They do it every year round this time. Choir groups come from not only Kamiyama city, but nearby towns as well. They sing all sorts of choir pieces, not just those that Sandou wrote."

"Never heard of him before."

This kind of topic was Satoshi's area of expertise and his alone. He seemed aware of this himself, and his ego inflated accordingly.

"He was a writer of nursery rhymes in the Taisho era children's magazine, 'Red Candle.' He wrote alongside Hakushuu Kitahara, Yaso Saijou, and Ujou Noguchi. Together, they were dubbed the 'four heavenly kings of children's songs. '"

That last 'kings' bit was undeniably made up by Satoshi.

"I was invited by Chi-chan to participate, so I went to a practice once; but now that I want to work on my manga..." Ibara mentioned somewhat apologetically. While she said this to me, it was likely aimed in part at Chitanda as well, though she didn't say anything in return. She might not have been aware that Ibara was talking about her at all.

The Classics Club was of course only one of many activities in Kamiyama High School, and outside of the things that classmates and students in the same year did with each other naturally, there was nothing else connecting us. I didn't know each and every thing that happened outside of the school, nor did I even think it was important to know in the first place. It's because of this mentality that the thought of Chitanda and Ibara performing together in a choir only came as a light surprise.

Satoshi rested his hands behind his head. "Well, let's decide when we should meet some other time, then. We can talk about it over the phone."

Although he mentioned this nonchalantly, he essentially said he would be taking care of it himself. He really was the type of person who took on more work than anyone else and did it without any pomp and circumstance; I really respected him for that.

"Yes, that will be fine."

With Chitanda's reply, it seemed that at least today's activities were over. The days were long at this point in the summer; even though it was nearing 6:00, there was no trace of the nighttime sky.

I put my novel in my bag and stood up. "Well then, I'll be going now."

"Oh yeah, see ya."

I wasn't intent on peeking, but as I was leaving the lecture room, I caught a glimpse of the book Chitanda was reading. It might've just been my imagination, but it appeared to be something along the lines of a career guide.

3.

On the first day of summer break, I made myself chilled noodles.

Perhaps due to the ominous clouds lurking in the sky all afternoon, looking as if they'd bring rain at any moment, it was somewhat chilly out as it neared lunchtime despite the summer just beginning. I couldn't exactly say it was a perfect day for chilled noodles, but I couldn't really change the menu since the noodles expired today.

I mixed a rough amount of vinegar, soy sauce, sugar, sesame oil, and mirin to throw together a quick sauce and then cooked and rinsed the noodles. The toppings I chose were tomatoes, ham, and a thinly cooked omelet wrapping that I had accidently forgotten on the stove and let burn a little. I cut the tomato into several chunks and the ham and egg into thin strips. I couldn't care less about the presentation, so I dried the noodles, piled them on a plate, and then simply dropped a handful of the toppings on top. Finally, I quickly poured the sauce over it and added the finishing touch: a dash of mustard to the edge of the plate.

I took the plate from the kitchen to the living room and prepared some chopsticks and barley tea; with that, the preparations were complete. As I readied myself to enjoy the meal, taking the chopsticks in hand, the phone started to ring.

I stubbornly ignored it as it continued to ring and looked at the clock hanging on the wall. While I was ready to be utterly offended that they had called right in the middle of lunchtime, it had already turned 2:30PM. Since the sun had started to shine in the afternoon, I took the laundry out to dry; it must have taken longer than I thought. I couldn't exactly claim that the caller had a lack of common sense. I stared intently at the chilled noodles in front of me. Maybe I should be thankful that I chose a noodle dish that wouldn't go stale. I stood up, swaying back and forth, and picked up the receiver.

"Yes," I replied in a voice that you couldn't really blame for being as irritated as it was.

"Hello, my name is Ibara. Is Oreki-san currently home?"

As much as I wanted to tell her that he wasn't, her voice seemed tense, so I couldn't bring myself to joke around.

"Ibara?"

"Oh, Oreki. Thank god. What the heck was up with that deep voice just now?"

"I was just about to eat lunch."

"I see, sorry about that. In that case, don't worry about—"

The fact that she called me definitely meant that something had happened. I had no choice but to let the chilled noodles sit for a little longer.

"I don't mind. What is it?"

"The thing is..."

It felt like I could hear hesitation from the other end of the call. She finally asked.

"Do you know any places Chi-chan might go?"

I moved the receiver to my other hand.

"...Why are you asking me?"

Her response carried a harsh tone.

"I called everyone I could think of. You're the last one."

"I see."

I wanted to ask her what had happened, but I could tell her back was up against the wall. The explanation would have to wait until later.

"My first guess would probably be the school."

“Yeah.”

“After that would be the city library. There’s the place next to Kaburaya Middle School—what’s it called—the café that we went to with Ohinata. There’s also Pineapple Sand, though it moved.”

I continued to offer her names as I thought of places Chitanda might go. In the end, however, my best guess was the library. Even I realized that the possibility of her going to a café on her own was slim.

“Got it, thanks. I didn’t think of the library. Fuku-chan’s doing general committee stuff at the school, so I asked him to look around, but he said her shoes aren’t there.”

“I see... Did anything happen?” I asked, and remembered what we talked about previously, “Wasn’t the choir festival today? Chitanda didn’t show up?”

“No, she hasn’t.”

So that’s why she was in such a rush.

“She goes on stage at 6:00, so we still have time, but she’s nowhere to be found.”

After I heard her say 6:00, somehow I felt the strength leave my body.

“Couldn’t she have just slept in?”

“She’s not like you.”

“Sure, I’ve been late to things here and there, but I’ve never once slept past my alarm. Never mind, that’s beside the point. Doesn’t that mean you just have to delay the preparations a little bit?”

She responded with clear irritation in her voice: “That’s not it. There’s an old lady saying that she rode the bus with Chi-chan all the way from Jinde, where her house is, to the cultural center.”

I guess the choir festival was being held in the city’s cultural center. I could

bike there from my house in around 10 minutes.

“So then she disappeared after arriving at the cultural center, huh. Considering you’re calling even me, I guess that means you’ve already searched the building.”

“Many times. She’s nowhere to be found.”

I switched hands once more.

“Should I be worried?”

“I don’t know. I feel like she’ll come in time, but the choir leader ended up getting worried and asked me to call people that know her.”

“It might be a bit late to ask this, but why are you there in the first place?”

“Did I tell you I participated in one of the practices? I just thought I’d come to help out as long as it was just for one day.”

So that’s what it was. “I understand. Well, at any rate, she hasn’t shown up here.”

I had said that as a joke, hoping it would help calm Ibara down a little as she seemed tense, but she responded coldly instead: “I didn’t think she went to your house.”

“Is that so."

“...Well, thanks anyways. I’m hanging up now.”

“Sure.”

The line disconnected. I set the receiver down and turned back to my chilled noodles.

It had one huge advantage that normal soba didn’t: I wouldn't burn myself. I could eat it in however short of a period I’d like.

The Kamiyama City Cultural Center was a four-story tall building covered in red tiles that resembled bricks; it was separated into two areas, one large hall and one small hall, both of which gave a grand impression. I didn't know how many people each could hold at first, but from looking at the information board, the large hall had around 1200 people and the smaller one 400. A signboard reading "Ejima Choir Festival" stood in the black marble atrium beyond the entranceway with a fair number of people walking about.

The choir festival itself had apparently started at 2:00. The fact that there were still four more hours before Chitanda went on stage was a testament to the sheer number of choir groups that must've been participating. Or perhaps there was an afternoon segment and an evening segment. Either way, there was nothing written on the signboard that revealed the answer to me.

I went to the information counter and started speaking to the clerk dressed in a light blue uniform.

"Um..."

The clerk was a woman who, even after seeing I was a student, retained her cheery, polite attitude.

"Yes. How may I help you?"

At that moment, I suddenly had a vicious realization. I didn't know the name of the choir group that Chitanda belonged to. I thought if I went to the group's waiting room I'd be able to meet up with Ibara, but because of this I had no way of asking.

"Um..." The clerk's cheery attitude changed into confusion.

"Oh, sorry."

I thought for a second about how to construct my question.

Ah! I guess there wasn't any reason to worry.

“Could you tell me where the waiting room is for the group that performs at 6:00?”

The clerk smiled brightly at me and then started to search through some files in her hands.

“At 6:00 is the Kamiyama Mixed Chorus. Their room is A7, on the second floor.”

As I expected, it was a pretty straightforward name. I thanked her and proceeded to go to the second floor.

I quickly found my destination: the A7 waiting room. Judging by the space between the doors leading to its neighboring rooms, the space inside was probably around 20 square meters. The door was off-white, almost gray, and made of metal. On it, held up by a piece of scotch tape, was a sheet of printer paper reading “Kamiyama Mixed Chorus.” The metal looked as if it would ring like a gong if knocked, so I skipped that and simply opened it.

The person inside looked at me as if someone flicked them in the face. It was Ibara. Once she realized it was me that entered, her eyes widened in surprise.

“Hey.” I held up a hand as I came inside.

As I did that, my foot got caught on an umbrella stand propped up next to the door. It looked rather unsteady, and, even though I didn’t think I put much force into it, it toppled over. The umbrella it held rolled out onto the carpet.

“Whoops.”
“What the hell are you doing?!”

It was supposed to be something along the lines of “the brave reinforcements have arrived,” but I ended up having a terrible first step. An elderly woman sitting in a folding chair nearby said, “Oh dear,” and went to stand up. It guess it was her umbrella.

“Sorry.” I apologized while putting the stand upright and placing the

umbrella back in it. My hands ended up getting wet, so I pulled my handkerchief out of my pocket and wiped them off.

“No, I’m the one who should be sorry.”

The lady said only this as she sat back down. She wore a black jacket and a black skirt, reminiscent of mourning attire, and the way she sat up straight left a strong impression.

Waiting Room A7 was just as large as I had initially imagined from the hallway, but the room was surprisingly sparse, giving it a deserted feeling. Aside from the ten or so folding chairs set up in the room, there was only a single desk lined up next to the wall bordering the hallway–nothing more. The desk was being used to hold personal belongings; on it was a row of bags. Along the other walls were more folding chairs stacked up against each other in their closed positions. Possibly due to their performance still being some time away, only Ibara and the elderly woman were in the room. Ibara jumped up and came over to me. As if forgiving me for my earlier umbrella mishap, the first thing she said was: “You came. Thanks.”

Although we had discussed this over the phone, I could only think about how intrusive I was. Who am I to recklessly stick my head into problems unrelated to school? And yet, well, I thought it’d be too heartless to simply continue pulling apart strands of chilled noodles while knowing that something this troubling was happening so close by. With that, I decided to come. That said, being appreciated like this gave me a somewhat awkward feeling. For some reason, I averted my eyes from Ibara’s gaze and looked around the room.

“It looks like Chitanda is still missing.”

“That’s right. She doesn’t have a cellphone either...”

“When was she supposed to be here?” As I said this, I briefly glanced at my wristwatch. It was almost 3:30.

“1:00.”

“That’s pretty early, isn’t it?”

“The choir group representatives had to go on stage when the concert started at 2:00. Chi-chan was supposed to go.”

“There was an opening event, huh? So then her real performance is at 6:00. Have the other members arrived?”

“Everyone who was supposed to come in the afternoon came in time—they’re currently listening to the other groups sing. The members that join us in the evening are supposed to show up around 5:00.”

If that was the case, even if Chitanda didn’t show up at 5:00, there shouldn’t be any major effect on the group as a whole. That was a small relief, but the fact that Chitanda suddenly disappeared after coming to the center without telling anybody wasn’t a small issue.

I was worrying a little bit about whether or not I should tell her what was on my mind, but considering Ibara seemed to be almost desperately anxious, I had to ask.

“Do you really need Chitanda?”

“What?”

“In a chorus, a lot of people are singing, right? Of course it’s not ideal, but missing only one person shouldn’t pose any real problems, right?”

Ibara shook her head. “That won’t work.”

“Why not? Are her parents coming or something?”

“They may be coming, but that’s not the problem... Chi-chan has a solo.”

Dear god. I looked up at the ceiling.

I had no idea what kind of song they were singing, but the person who sings the solo is the star. The fact that she was missing was no laughing matter. While Ibara was probably genuinely concerned about Chitanda’s wellbeing, the rest of the choir group was likely anxious that they might not even be able to go up on stage at all.

In order to shake off the negative atmosphere, I tried asking a question.

“What other information do you have about her whereabouts?”

Ibara took out a small notebook that looked like it could fit in the palm of her hand. She rifled through the pages as she answered.

“Juumonji-san told me she didn’t go to her place. Other than the school, she told me Castle Park and Kobundo Bookstore. Irisu-senpai mentioned a clothing store called Houki-ya and Arekusu Shrine.”

I scratched my head.

“I don’t know about Houki-ya, but the rest are really far. If she came here by bus, she would’ve probably had to walk. All of those places would take way too long to walk to.”

“I think she could if she really wanted to, but I can’t imagine why she would.”

“The train station is within walking distance, so you’re saying she could’ve taken a different bus at the bus center in front of the station, huh.”

“But would she do that?”

I couldn’t see it happening... if it was a normal situation of course. There was a fundamental question regarding all of this.

“Hey, did Chitanda go somewhere of her own accord? Or, and I hate to say this, do you think she got wound up in some incident?”

“Don’t ask something that horrible…”

Her voice was terribly faint.

“There’s no way I could answer that. I have no way of knowing.”

That was only to be expected. I continued to scratch my head.

The knob on the door turned with a metallic clanking noise, and the door

itself opened shortly after. Ibara and I turned to face the entrance, but the person standing there was not Chitanda; instead, a woman who looked to be somewhere in her forties entered. She had on a beige jacket and in her hair was a shining ornament made from a gem, or maybe a well-crafted piece of glass. She was likely a member of the choir group.

“Danbayashi-san,” called Ibara.

The woman named Danbayashi wore a stiff expression as she walked towards us and asked her question.

“Well? Is she here?”

“No.”

“I see. This isn’t good.”

Her brow furrowed as she muttered this, and then she continued talking to Ibara as if she suddenly noticed me.

“And this is...?”

“Ah, this is Oreki-kun. We’re in the same club. He came to help search.”

To have her call me “Oreki-kun” didn’t make me feel even slightly more comfortable. As I thought this, Ibara turned her head to look at me.
“I can assume that’s what you’re here to do, right?”

Even though this was the start of summer break, I didn’t come here to play around, as one would expect. As I nodded, Danbayashi-san asked me a question out of nowhere.

“Would you happen to know anything?”

Bewildered, I responded: “No, not at the moment.”

She sighed deeply, almost as if doing it on purpose.

“I see...”

Her expression and voice once more began to ooze irritation as she continued.

“I could tell the pressure was getting to her, but to think she’s not even showing up today. I swear, this is unbelievable.”

“What if she’s just getting her thoughts in order?”

“If that was the case then she should’ve told someone. No matter how nervous she was, disappearing without telling anyone is just plain irresponsible.”

Considering their performance was slated for 6:00, I thought she may have been overreacting somewhat, but at the same time, I suppose it was only natural for her to be flustered when the soloist has gone missing.

However, I couldn’t honestly agree with her theory of Chitanda disappearing due to the pressure. It’s not that I thought she wasn’t the type to get nervous; whenever she found herself speaking on the campus radio, she always ended up scared stiff. Even then, she always managed to do what needed to be done. So, especially in this situation, I found it hard to imagine that she would’ve been unable to cope with the stress. If she was, in fact, not here by her own decision, the reason is likely unrelated to the pressure of having the solo part.

“I suppose we should try calling her house after all.”

Danbayashi-san muttered to herself with her hand over her lips. At that moment, the elderly lady sitting on a folding chair nearby started to speak.

“You needn’t worry; I believe she’ll come in due time.”

“I understand what you’re saying, Yokote-san, but I really can’t help but feel anxious about it.”

Although Danbayashi-san was clearly losing her temper, the woman named Yokote never once lost her gentle tone.

“Many things happen to the youthful—many fortunate things. You should give her another hour without punishing her.”

“Again with that... Didn’t you say the same thing earlier?”

“Well then, I suppose I did.”

Yokote-san remained completely calm, so perhaps embarrassed at her own flustered appearance, Danbayashi-san averted her gaze.

“...True enough, we still have some time left. Fine. We’ll wait a little longer.”

She then left the waiting room immediately after saying this, not even glancing at Ibara nor me on the way out. Hearing the door firmly shut, I asked a question, still somewhat taken aback.

“So, who was that?”

“Danbayashi-san. She’s the choir group’s... how should I describe it? The manager?”

“So the leader?”

“She’s not exactly the lead part, nor is she the group head. Umm, she directs the group.”
I think I get the gist of it. You occasionally meet people like that.

“She mentioned something about ‘earlier.’ Is she always like that?”

Ibara scowled and responded, “Yeah, *always*.”

I glanced over at Yokote-san. If all the other members had gone to the hall, then I suppose she had some reason to stay here, sitting alone on her folding chair. Another thought struck me, so I decided to ask.

“Hey, Ibara, you said that there was a lady who rode together with Chitanda on the bus from Jinde, right? Was it her?”

“That’s right: Yokote-san.”

Just as I had thought. Although I couldn’t be certain since Jinde is a large

district, there's a strong possibility that Yokote-san lived near Chitanda; they may have even known each other prior to the festival. Her covering for Chitanda to Danbayashi-san lent further credence to that theory.

Perhaps unable to keep still, Ibara started to turn around.

"I'm going to go check the building again."

"I'll go in a little bit as well."

"Thanks."

She hurried off and left the two us—Yokote-san and me—alone in the room.

Since Chitanda had disappeared just after arriving at the cultural center, the woman I next to me was probably the last person to have seen her. Searching for Chitanda on foot was all well and good, but where we stood currently, there was no way to even guess where she might've gone. I figured I might as well learn from Yokote-san whatever I could.

"Um, excuse me," I started.

She placed her hands on her lap and tilted her head only slightly with curiosity. "Yes?"

"I hear you rode the bus here together with Chitanda...-san. I'm trying to come up with ideas to find her; would you mind telling me anything you may have noticed?"

"Oh my, you're..."

Without acknowledging my question, she looked at my face and then suddenly smiled.

"I thought I recognized you from somewhere! You were the young man who held the Chitanda daughter's umbrella at this year's Living Doll Festival. You did a splendid job!"

Yes, that had indeed happened. Considering she was a resident of Jinde, it

only makes sense that she would've seen the festival. Well, her recognizing my face would only play to my advantage.

"Thank you very much. So? What was Chitanda-san acting like?"

As I gave a hurried reply, Yokote-san began to think with "let's see..." Finally, she began to speak little by little.

"I was by myself at the Jinde bus station. Chitanda-san dropped off the young lady by car and then opened window to offer us well–wishes."

'Chitanda-san' must have referred to Chitanda's mother or father. For now, it didn't really matter which one it was.

"The young lady and I then exchanged greetings. After that, the two of us stood under our umbrellas as we waited for the bus to arrive."

Something that caught my interest was the fact that Chitanda was driven to the bus stop. Couldn't she have gone all the way to the cultural center that way? Well, a simple answer could be that the drive to the bus stop was shorter than the drive to the cultural center and the "Chitanda-san" mentioned must have had more pressing matters.

If I was intending on searching for her, there was still something essential that I hadn't asked yet.

"Do you remember what Chitanda...-san was wearing?"

Once more, Yokote-san muttered: "Let's see."

"She had on her stage ensemble, so she was wearing a white shirt with a black skirt. Her shoes were also black, too, and her socks were white. She also had her cream-colored bag—oh, and her umbrella was a striking shade of crimson. An unusual choice, I thought."

If that was the stage outfit, then I had no idea what was up with the beige jacket that Danbayashi-san was wearing earlier. She'd probably change out of it before going on stage.

At any rate, aside from the things she was carrying, Chitanda was entirely

in monochrome. Searching for her inside the cultural center would be difficult, but it seemed like she would stand out if she were outside.

“So the two of you rode the bus together?”

“That is correct—just the two of us.”

“Which bus was it?”

“The 1:00 bus, on the dot.”

“When did it arrive here?”

“Around 1:30.”

Chitanda was supposed to have arrived here at 1:30, so she had ridden the bus just in time as to not be late. Any earlier and it would have probably eaten into her lunchtime, and there was no reason to come earlier anyways; I applaud her efficiency.

“Chitanda also got off at the cultural center bus stop, right?”

“Yes.” Yokote-san nodded and then added: “The two of us came to this waiting room together, but before I realized it, she was gone.”

Even though the person accompanying Yokote-san had vanished from right in front of her, she simply looked like she was peacefully waiting for Chitanda to return. I wonder where her strength of mind comes from, to display no agitation whatsoever in this bizarre situation.

“Do you have any idea where Chitanda might’ve gone?”

As I asked this final question, Yokote-san returned a peaceful smile. “I’m sure she’s just getting some fresh air to calm her nerves. There’s no need to be worried.”

4.

As I left the waiting room, I could hear some sort of commotion from the entrance hall in the distance. It was the area right before the hallway, where Ibara had gone to check once more.

Although I had come to search the building's every nook and cranny for her, there wasn't much time left. Perhaps something had come up, and she had to leave. Ibara saw me standing in front of the waiting room and her brow furrowed a bit.

"You're still here?"

Without giving me time to respond, she continued.

"Still, this is perfect. Fuku-chan just called to tell me that he's leaving school and wanted to know if there was anything he could do. I told him I was going to ask you, then get back to him."

This was a welcome request. Satoshi was a sensible person, so I could trust him with finding information.
"Let's see..."

We had talked previously about the library and Castle Gardens, so one option would be to have him check those two places, and yet, honestly speaking, I felt like it was gamble with low chances of success. I looked at my wristwatch, and it read a little before 4:00. We would start to feel the crunch soon. I couldn't afford to use this precious mobility on something pointless like that.

There was something that had been tugging at the back of my mind. I couldn't exactly shape that thought into coherent sentences yet, but rather than having him run around Kamiyama City to bet on a gamble with chances as thin as paper, I could see continuing this line of thought possibly paying out.

"Have him go to the station."

“Kamiyama Station?!”

Ibara’s voice was almost in hysterics. “What do I tell him to do there?”

Nothing really, I wasn’t planning on having him go on some kind of trip.

“Rather than the station, I want him to go to the bus center that’s connected to it. I want him to get a route map and timetable and bring it here.”

Ibara opened her mouth as if wanting to say something. There was no doubt she wanted to know why, however her expression stiffened as if she revised her thoughts, and she bit her tongue.

“A route map and timetable. I understand,” she nodded, “How will he deliver it?”

“I’ll be waiting at the entrance. It’s crowded there, but it should be fine.”

“Okay.”

While saying this, she pulled out her cellphone. Satoshi apparently picked up after a couple seconds, and Ibara then relayed my request over the line. The call finally ended, and Ibara started talking to me once more, phone still in hand.

“He said he’ll be here in 15 minutes.”

Even if you came here straight from Kamiyama High School, it’d probably take more than 15 minutes, and he wasn’t coming straight here. He was also going to stop at the station for me; there was no way he’d make it in time. He might’ve been trying to express how much he’d be hurrying, but I would have felt terrible if he had ended up getting into an accident because of me.

“Could you text him to not be reckless in coming here?”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I was only half done looking around when I came back, so I’ll finish my search of the building. If I still can’t find her after that, I’m thinking I’ll go search in the nearby park, too. Don’t worry about me; just do what you need to do.”

I had no other choice. After all, I didn’t have a cellphone, so I wouldn’t be able to coordinate my efforts with her.

“I understand. See you, then.”

I headed to the first floor, leaving Ibara as she started to type out her message.

Although the Ejima Choir Festival started at 2:00, the entrance hall was still packed. Since there were a ton of choir groups participating, maybe the place was filling with people who arrived just in time to watch their friends perform. I guess that meant that new people were constantly arriving, didn’t it?

As I stood in the center of the black marble floor of the entrance hall, I scanned all around me just to confirm that Chitanda wasn’t there.
She was supposedly wearing a white shirt and black skirt. There were plenty of people whose clothes matched that description, but none of them even slightly resembled Chitanda. Well, I suppose if she were here, she’d return to the waiting room by herself without any need for me to worry.

I hadn’t noticed it previously, but there were some Ejima Choir Festival pamphlets stacked up on the information counter. I took one to kill time as I waited for Satoshi. I went to the entranceway and stood in the most conspicuous location in front of the large signboard reading “Ejima Choir Festival,” and then opened the pamphlet.

The pamphlet itself was cream-colored and printed on glossy paper. The Ejima Choir Festival start time was clearly indicated as being 2:00, but nothing was written about the ending time. Perhaps it was like that so they could extend or shorten it in case of any unforeseen issues; maybe they had some other reason. The thought crossed my mind that it would make it difficult for the guests to plan their dinner.

The text introducing the participating choir groups was very small. The majority of the page was dedicated to the lyrics of Sandou Ejima pieces. I hadn't heard of Sandou Ejima until Satoshi had first mentioned him, but it seems like he lived quite some time ago. All of the words seemed archaic. The pamphlet had on it which group was performing which piece, so I searched for the one being done by Chitanda's group, the Kamiyama Mixed Chorus.

"This one, huh."

It was a piece titled "Moon Over Release."

I wonder if no one warned him it sounded like that famous Rentarou Taki composition.[9]

I went ahead and read the lyrics out of boredom.

Moon Over Release

What a beautiful voice, that of the caged bird!

Although I contemplate the virtue of release,

A figure of this fleeting world can never attain eternity.

Ah, I pray once more. I, too, strive

To live in the unrestricted skies.

I release ye, o' caged bird.

How lovely the fish in a tank is.

Although I contemplate the virtue of release,

A figure of this fleeting world can never attain eternity.

Ah, I pray once more. I, too, strive

To die in the unrestricted seas.

I release ye, o' trapped fish.

"...I'm not sure I get it."

Unfortunately, I hadn't an ounce of poetic sentiment. Regardless of my opinion on the work, I suppose I should at least keep in mind the kind of song they'd be singing. It looked like they'd be performing one more piece, but I couldn't find anything about it other than the name, not that it mattered; it was a famous pop song—so famous that even I knew it. It had something to do with everyone living in harmony, or something like that.

I rolled up the pamphlet into a tube in my right hand and started to hit it against my left palm. As I produced a steady, hollow rhythm, my gaze absentmindedly wandered towards the small area in front of the entryway.

From what I could see outside the glass doors, the clouds had all but vanished; an intense sunlight was shining down from above. An elderly woman carrying a sun umbrella walked in while wiping her sweat, and then suddenly smiled. I wondered what on earth had caused that, but then realized she had to have been overjoyed by a sudden rush of air conditioning. From what I could tell, the air conditioning in the entrance couldn't have been very effective; it has to travel all the way down to the entrance from the third floor. Even from here, most of the room felt unaffected. Well, it was probably preferable to being outside, at least.

"Hm?"

I suddenly noticed something interesting about that elderly woman.

She had on a black skirt and white shirt and carried a small shoulder bag over her dark blue jacket. Since her clothing matched Chitanda's, I figured this woman wasn't a guest; rather, she was a member of the choir group. I

had no idea if this was true or not, but I was strangely curious about it.

A skirt, a shirt, a jacket, a shoulder bag, a sun umbrella. Air conditioning and a smile.

“Oh.”

That’s right.

“A sun umbrella.”

In the cultural center’s entranceway were a number of umbrella stands lined up next to each other. There were also umbrella stands lined up next to the wall in the entrance hall—probably since the entrance area alone didn’t have enough space to hold 1600 peoples’ umbrellas. The elderly lady, however, continued to hold onto her umbrella as she ascended the stairs.

I suddenly had a realization and headed over to the information counter. Behind it was the same pleasant lady as before.

“Are you looking for something?” she asked.

“This might be a strange question.”

“Of course, I’ll help you in any way I can.”

No matter how you looked at it, I was clearly just a high schooler; there was no need for her to be so polite. What a difficult job, I thought.

“Are the choir performers not allowed to use the umbrella stands at the entrance?”

I thought it was an undeniably strange question to ask, but the clerk responded without a hint of hesitation: “That’s correct. In order to leave as much room as possible for the guests, we’ve asked them to use the umbrella stands provided in the waiting rooms.”

“Okay, thank you very much.”

“Of course. If you have any further questions, please feel free to ask.”

After hearing that impeccably polite response, I felt guilty for some strange reason and turned to leave the counter. With this information, I now understand the reason that the elderly lady earlier didn't leave her umbrella in the stands out front.

"..."

With this, I became a little closer to finding out where Chitanda had gone. At the very least, it wasn't *there*...

I walked back towards the "Ejima Choir Festival" signboard, and decided to think about it a little more. But on the way there, a voice called out, interrupting my return.

"I won't tell you to look up, but you could at least look in front of you, Houtarou!"

In the place where I had been just until recently stood Satoshi, absolutely drenched in sweat.

"Hey."

As I said this, I looked down at my watch. It read 4:14. It had truly been 15 minutes since he had talked with Ibara earlier. We even told him to not be reckless.

"That was fast."

"Was it? Anyways, here's your order."

The bus timetable and route map were both printed on glossy paper, folded in his hands.

"Sorry to make you do this for me."

"No problem, 'twas but a simple matter."

His expression then became serious.

“I heard about the situation from Mayaka. She said Chitanda disappeared?”

“That seems to be the case.”

“She wasn’t at the school. At the very least her shoes weren’t in the school’s entrance. Still, this is really troubling.”

“Uh huh.”

It was a half-hearted response; I was focused on reading the timetable.

“Chitanda-san ended up going somewhere in this town and doesn’t have a cellphone on her. I mean sure, I know a place or two that she might go, but there’s no time to check them all one by one. Houtarou, the scale is a bit too big this time, and I’m feeling a little like my hands are tied behind my back right now.”

I didn’t have enough information to completely examine the timetable that he’d brought for me. As expected, the number of buses that passed through Jinde was small, and it looked like there was only one running at 1:00 in the afternoon. I nodded once and then folded up the timetable once more. Satoshi wiped the sweat dripping down his face with his hand, and then continued.

“I really am sorry, but I have something l need to take care of, so I’m going to need to leave soon. But c’mon: It’s Chitanda we’re talking about. I don’t think there’s any need to worry… Right, Houtarou? Wait, have you just figured out something about where she might be?”

“Something like that.”

As I said this, Satoshi’s eyes grew wide. I guess he didn’t expect me to say that.

“Wha—wait, what?! Do you actually know where she is right now?”

“I wouldn’t be telling the truth if I said I knew the exact answer… but I do have something in mind. I have a lead, at least.”

If I’m right, however, the real problem will be what happens after finding her.

I checked my watch. There was 1 hour and 40 minutes until her solo performance.

What Satoshi said had truth to it.

To find the missing Chitanda by searching every nook and cranny of Kamiyama City would require more than a week. Since an exhaustive search would be no good, it was necessary to adopt an efficient method, one which minimizes time and energy spent. It’s a method that was probably simpler than Satoshi was imagining.

And yet...

“So what are you going to do?”

He asked this directly to my face, making it difficult to respond. I wouldn’t say I was the type of person to really care about what others thought of me, but if I were to confidently say something like, “This is what we should do,” before being certain, even I would get a little embarrassed if the plan didn’t work out.

“Well, I’m not really certain yet...”

I responded with a poor attempt at dodging his question and then tried to forcefully change the topic completely with my own well-timed question that I had wanted to ask anyways.

“By the way, was Sandou Ejima really that famous—to the point where he was called one of the Four Something-or-other Heavenly Kings?”

I’m sure Satoshi was fully aware that I was trying to pull the conversation away from Chitanda, but he responded as if he didn’t seem to mind.

“I guess I might’ve exaggerated it a little, but even if you factor my love of

local cultures into how I described them earlier, the fact that Hakushuu, Ujou, and the like were unrivaled was still true, in my opinion."

"So you're saying that calling it an exaggeration... is an exaggeration itself?"

Satoshi silently shrugged in response. I opened the pamphlet I picked up earlier from the reception desk.

"It looks like Chitanda's going to be singing this 'Moon Over Release' song."

"Is that so?"
Satoshi threw a quick glance at the lyrics, nodding with a strangely satisfied expression. "That's right. I don't really know that much on the subject, but this is classic Sandou Ejima."

"Oh yeah? Why is it 'classic' Ejima?"

"If I had to describe it, I'd say it's because it's excessively preachy."

I see, it's preachy. Without realizing it, I was nodding vigorously. It was truly cathartic to have been given the perfect word to describe the thoughts I had when initially reading it.

"Things like filial piety, diligence, honesty—his works were always dedicating to devoutly praising these kinds of values. The man himself was originally a monk, and it was written in a book I read once that his brotherly life may have been where the preachy quality came from. That might be why he was such a big deal, well, at least to the people who knew about him."

"And now we even have a festival named after him."

He smiled back, his expression containing a hint a cynicism.

"Choirs usually have periodic performances. That's just the kind of group they are. If you're going to hold an event, you might as well attach a cool-sounding name to it. I can understand where they're coming from on that

front.”

I couldn’t sympathize personally, but if I imagined it was Satoshi instead, I’d understand completely.

Satoshi glanced down at his watch. His eyebrows knitted slightly.

“I have to go now. I swear... I got myself tied up with something really annoying.”

He really did want to help me in spite of his business. I could readily tell that’s what his words implied.

“Don’t worry about it. So, what do you have to do?”

“The thing is—“

It seemed like he didn’t have much time, but he leaned in to complain anyways. I guess he really wanted to get it off his shoulders and vent.

“My cousin and his wife are coming over. The nephew is such a pain.”

“Your cousin’s kid is also your nephew?”

“It’s called something like a cousin twice removed, but I just call him my nephew. He really likes shogi, so he’s going to pester me to play with him.”

I never would’ve thought that Satoshi couldn’t play shogi, especially considering he always tried everything out. Oh, wait, that’s not true at all. He was actually really good at shogi, if I remember correctly. One night, on a study trip in middle school, he played a game against one of our classmates who always bragged about placing third in a city tournament—and won.

“What’s wrong with playing him then?”

“He cries whenever I win, and doesn’t want to stop playing until he does instead. He’ll even skip dinner.”

“That’s pretty annoying.”

Satoshi shook his head.

“I don’t really mind that part. All I have to do is let him win.”

I knew Satoshi when he was in middle school. I knew the part of him that would go to any lengths necessary for victory; he would abuse loopholes in the rules or let a game become stale and boring as long as it would lead to his victory. That said, I also knew the part of him that would go against his own beliefs, discarding any part of his personality, in a heartbeat.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“If I don’t say ‘I give up,’ he calls me a coward and screams bloody murder.”

In shogi, you lose if you end up in a situation where you king will be taken no matter what you do, but you can forfeit before it comes to that. As far as I know, saying “I give up” is the most common way to communicate your surrender.

“Because I’m only playing to appease him, I’ll let him checkmate me; but he won’t let me off with a simple ‘your win’ or ‘you beat me.’ I mean it’s a checkmate, so there’s really nothing to say.”

“Do you really hate saying ‘I give up’ that much?”

Satoshi face changed to a somewhat pained expression.

“I can’t help but think: ‘How about you make me say it by *actually* beating me with your own skill.’ I’m really bad at saying things I don’t believe in. It’s honestly just a problem with the choice of words, and even he has a point, but—I don’t know. I guess it just means I’m still immature.”

This wasn’t the kind of conversation we should be having while our remaining time was ticking away with every moment, but I couldn’t help myself from smiling bitterly at that.

“I completely understand. I was at a relative’s wedding a while back, and I __“

It was a Christian-style wedding. I had entered the church wearing a stiff-collared school uniform and listened to the reverend's sermon—

Hmm…

I suddenly started to feel like something was lingering on the tip of my tongue. I couldn't really put it into words, but just as I was about to put my finger on it, the thought came and was then washed away, as if a wave carried it back to sea. What was it, I wonder? What was it about a game of shogi and a wedding ceremony that brought something so vividly to my mind?

"So that's why I have to leave, Houtarou."

His voice brought me back to my senses.

"Hm? Yeah, okay."

"I'm asking you to find Chitanda. I'm really sorry I can't help you at a time like this."

"It's fine."

As I was still collecting my thoughts, I added on the spur of the moment, "Leave the rest to me." Satoshi's eyes widened and he cracked a little smile.

"Got it. I'll leave it to you—I mean, in the end, the only one who'd be able to find the hidden Chitanda would probably be you anyways."

5.

I returned to room A7 on the second floor, but Ibara was nowhere to be seen. I guess she was searching the surrounding area like she said she was going to do earlier.

A folding chair was set up in the center of the 20 square meter or so room, and Yokote-san was the only one sitting. Danbayashi-san was also there—next to the window—and was almost certainly glaring at me as I entered. But as soon as I looked over, her shoulders relaxed as if she was disappointed.

“I thought you were the girl.”

I lowered my head a bit, half as a greeting and half as an apology for not being Chitanda, but Danbayashi-san didn’t even spare me another glance; she immediately turned to start arguing with Yokote-san.

“Well then Yokote-san. An hour has passed. We’re calling her house now. She might not make it at this point, but if we aren’t even going to consider getting someone else to sing the solo instead, then we have no other option.”

Ever since earlier, Danbayashi-san’s tone has seemingly carried all manners of ill will directed at the “youth of today.” If you took out all of those negative emotions, her upturned eyes genuinely made her look like a fish. It was only understandable though, given the fact that she was battling a time limit.

As usual, Yokote-san remained calm and composed and responded: “I see, but I’m sure she’ll come any second now. How about we give her another hour?”

“Again with that—look, this isn’t the time to be all easygoing. Listen, Yokote-san, I’m going to call her right now, so I’m asking you to please give me her family’s number.”

I see. I didn’t understand why she was trying to get Yokote-san’s approval

in order to contact Chitanda, but it looks like she didn't know the number. The surname Chitanda wasn't exactly common, so it didn't seem like it would be too difficult to find it in the phone book, however—wait, hold up a second. If Danbayashi-san was after her phone number, that meant I was going to be in her sights too, doesn't it?

As I thought this and was about to turn back, it was already far too late. Danbayashi-san spun around to look at me and started to briskly walk closer and closer, her terrifying face creased at the forehead.

"You! You're that girl's classmate, right?"

For now, I'll just correct her.

"I'm not her classmate. I'm in a different class."
"Who cares?!"

"Well, umm..."

I suppose that no one did—in fact—care.

"Then you must know Chitanda-san's phone number, right?!"

Now then, I was in a bind. Of course I had gotten each of their numbers since we may have needed to contact each other about the club, but, unsurprisingly, I did not have them committed to memory. I had nothing to hide, so I told her the truth.

"I have the numbers, but I'd have to go back home to get them."

"Don't you have a cellphone?"

"No."

Danbayashi-san responded in a shrill voice.

"You have *got* to be kidding me!"

But I wasn't. I should probably say something before she gets too upset,

though. I didn't have time to debate with her, so I put on my best serious expression; I could manage a pretty good one if I put my heart into it.

"Well, I know where Chitanda is: her stomach hurts because she's so nervous, so she's resting."

Danbayashi-san's jaw dropped. I expected her to be surprised upon her hearing an update about Chitanda, especially since it came out of nowhere.

"She'll be here even if you stop looking for her, but I understand: you're nervous that she won't make it in time. Don't worry, I'll go get her right now."

Thinking about it logically, my having come into contact with her—especially since I didn't have a cellphone—was an unlikely story at best, but Danbayashi-san didn't seem to doubt me. In fact, she seemed relieved; her stern expression melted almost instantaneously. She replied in a strangely curt manner, "Oh, I see. Well then, I'll leave it to you," and turned to leave the waiting room. Maybe she was embarrassed after realizing just how flustered she was only minutes ago.

While I appreciated that she was going to leave without a fight, there was still something I wanted to ask her before I headed out. I called out to her as she reached for the door-handle.

"Umm..."

"Huh?" Startled, she turned to look at me with a surprised expression. "Are you talking to me? There's more?"

"Well, it's not very important, but..."

As I was speaking, I pulled out the pamphlet I received from the information counter and pointed at the lyrics to the song being sung by Chitanda, "Moon Over Release."

"Which part is Chitanda going to be singing?"

Danbayashi-san's brow furrowed once more.

“Huh? Why would you want to know something like that?”

I had assumed that she would simply tell me if I asked her nonchalantly enough, but instead she raised her defenses and countered with a question of her own.

“Well you see—” I spoke slowly so I could come up with a good excuse. “I want to take a picture of her when she’s singing her solo for our club’s records. I’ve have to get the timing just right. I was going to ask Chitanda herself, but it looks like I might not get the chance.”

I wonder if that sounded a bit too forced.

“Oh, that’s why? Uh, sure.”

It looks like she bought it. Danbayashi-san’s finger started to move over the lyrics.

“Hmm… right here.”

Ah, I pray once more. I, too, strive

to live in the unrestricted skies.

“This part is sung with the chest, so it has a full sound and looks emotional. It’d probably be better if you took a video though.”

As she said that, she started studying me carefully. Of course, I didn’t have anything like a DSLR or camcorder on me. Her expression started to harden; she must have been getting suspicious, so I quickly took the initiative.

“Thank you very much. I’ll go ahead and tell Ibara.”

Of course Ibara didn’t have a camera either, but Danbayashi-san couldn’t

have known that for sure.

“Hmm… that’s a good idea. Well then, I’m going to return to the hall and tell everyone that we found her. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

After Danbayashi-san left the room and the door closed with a heavy thud behind her, the only two people left were Yokote-san and I. Since there were only two of us in a room that was meant to hold ten or so people, the empty space around me felt terribly strange and uncomfortable.

Yokote-san sat deeply rooted in her folding chair, and her hands rested on top of her lap. She hadn’t moved an inch in the hour I spent with Satoshi; she was so still, I started to wonder if she really had taken root in her metal chair—not moving an inch since I’d left.

At this moment, however, her calm, gentle eyes were fixed intently on me, as if silently demanding to know what was going on.

I approached her and stood right in front of that gaze. I then lowered my head respectfully.

“I haven’t introduced myself yet. My name is Oreki Houtarou. I’m in the same grade as Chitanda-san, as well as in the same club.”

Yokote-san avoided eye contact for a split second, but then quickly formed an almost imperceptible smile as she lowered her head in return.

“I’m so pleased to meet you. My name is Atsuko Yokote. Forgive me for not standing up to greet you; my knees are not what they used to be.”

“Of course, I don’t hold that against you.”

“Thank you.”

It was a polite exchange, but in the end, our warm words were just temporary pleasantries. Yokote-san’s eyes narrowed and her voice stiffened slightly as well, almost as if taking on an accusatory tone.

“Oreki-san. You mentioned that you know where the Chitandas’ daughter is, didn’t you? Was that really true?”

I responded without hesitation: “No, it was a lie.”

She opened her mouth and closed it again, as if at a loss for words. She stared at me fixedly, and then finally muttered, “A lie...”

“I needed Danbayashi-san to leave, so I lied to her.”

“Oh? Why would you do something like that?”

Although she was clearly perplexed by the fact that I had lied, it seemed like she wasn’t reproaching me for doing it. It was most likely because she couldn’t bring herself to criticize me for lying.

“I did it because there’s something I’d like to ask you, Yokote-san.”

“Me? What is it?”

I briefly glanced down at my watch and saw that it was nearing 4:20; there was little time left. This wasn’t the time to be beating around the bush. Besides, “if I have to do it, I’ll do it quickly.” My mantra meant that I needed to get right to the point.

“You said that you rode the bus with Chitanda all the way to the cultural center and came with her to this very room, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

Accusing someone always requires a good deal of courage. I didn’t have much, however, so I continued while avoiding her gaze.

“You’re lying.”

Yokote’s expression froze.

What Satoshi said had truth to it; there was no use in using brute force to search for Chitanda. I had to find another method and, of course, the simplest one would be to just ask the person who knew.

Without a doubt, Yokote-san had lied about Chitanda’s arrival. She knew

something, and getting it out of her would be much faster than searching around every cafe and bookstore in Kamiyama City.

Her hands stiffened, as if succumbing to nervous tension while they rested on top of her lap. I'd be able to keep our conversation short if only she'd come clean right away, but that was probably wishful thinking. After all, I haven't done anything to earn her trust.

As I expected, she started to feign ignorance as she talked.

"What are you talking about?"

Abandoning my sliver of hope that this might end quickly, I tried to goad it out of her once more.

"I want to resolve this as quickly as I can, so would you please take back your statement claiming you rode the bus with Chitanda?"

"But that's the truth. How could you possibly say something like that; don't you think you're being a little rude?"

My emotions grew unsteady as I encountered this resistance head-on. Negotiation and persuasion were never my strong suits. If I had the opportunity, I would've pushed it all on Satoshi or Chitanda and returned to my quiet school life. In the end, however, I was the only one here. Not only that, I was pressed for time. I balled my hands into fists and summoned up as much courage as I could.

"I'm sorry. I run the risk of repeating myself at this point, but it's essentially impossible that you came with Chitanda to this room."

"How about you explain why."

"Of course. The logic itself is incredibly straightforward."

I pointed towards the door at the front of the waiting room.

"It's because of that."

“The door?”

“No. I’m talking about the umbrella stand, of course.”

Next to the door was an unstable umbrella stand, and only a single black umbrella stuck out from it. I had accidentally gotten my foot caught on it when I entered last time and toppled it over as a result. In picking it back up, my hand got wet.

“It didn’t rain near my house, but—since the umbrella was wet—I can only assume that it rained in Jinde.”

“I believe I already said this.”

“Yes, I heard. That and how Chitanda had a crimson umbrella while she waited for the bus. But look: that umbrella of hers is nowhere to be found. It has been cloudy in this area since the morning, but when you supposedly arrived with Chitanda at 1:30, it had become sunny. After coming all the way here once, I have a hard time imagining her taking the umbrella somewhere else. That means that Chitanda didn’t come here at all, which then means I am not the only one to have lied today.”

Yokote-san placed a hand on her cheek. “How could you possibly come to that conclusion solely because her umbrella isn’t here? This isn’t the only umbrella stand in the building, you know.”

“Of course there are also some in the entrance way downstairs. Performers were expressly asked to use the ones in the waiting rooms whenever possible, though.”

“As much as possible—”

It wasn’t like you could follow every rule perfectly; actually, even *knowing* each and every rule was unlikely. I was, of course, fully aware of this.

“Well, had Chitanda come here alone, it would’ve been entirely possible for her to have used a different umbrella stand due to not knowing about the rule. But that wasn’t the case, was it? I tried to imagine it—a scenario where you and Chitanda came to this room together, but where only you followed the rules while Chitanda ignored them—and it seems impossible.

It only makes sense that people grouped together do the same things. Not only that, but Chitanda's the type of person to know and follow all of the rules."

Yokote-san didn't respond, and the feeling that she still wouldn't tell me what really happened still persisted, so I eased up and changed my approach.

"Even with this, I don't have enough evidence to prove that Chitanda hasn't been here. Had Chitanda actually arrived and then decided to return home for whatever reason, she may have decided not to come back and take her umbrella with her. It's much easier to find evidence of someone being somewhere than *not* being there."

"I suppose so."

I took a small breath and examined her out of the corner of my eye.

"By the way, you've been in this room since you got here, correct?"

I suddenly decided to change the subject.

"Even though the rest of the choir members are in the hall?"

Yokote-san's brow furrowed with displeasure.

"I'm not breaking any rules."

"Of course not. But something has been bugging me. Ever since I arrived, you've been saying something weird to Danbayashi-san every time she's mentioned Chitanda's absence: 'I'm sure she'll come any second now.'"

"Was my wording strange?"

I shook my head. "No. I don't think that phrase itself is strange."

"Then I don't see..."

"However, you said more: 'She'll come any second, just give her an hour.'

Why one hour? Why not say ‘just a little longer’ or ‘some more time?’ You specifically mentioned one hour. I only heard you mention it twice, but apparently you even said it once before I came; Danbayashi-san said something along those lines. Instead of 30 minutes or 2 hours, why did you say one hour?”

I’d considered that maybe it was just a thing that Yokote-san says in her normal speech, but I had another theory; thanks to information provided by Satoshi, I was able to have complete confidence in my hypothesis. The one hour she kept mentioning—made me aware of something important.

“You were referring to the bus.”

While Yokote-san’s expression didn’t change, I got the impression that her shoulders suddenly stiffened.

I took out the timetable that Satoshi had retrieved for me.

“This is the bus timetable. In order to get this, my friend had to bike over here like a madman. It’s a good thing he didn’t hurt himself. According to this, there are a limited number of buses connecting Jinde and the cultural center, and they’re an hour apart. This is why you specifically said to wait one hour, isn’t it?”

I watched Yokote-san as she averted her gaze. I was right.

“By saying ‘wait one hour,’ you essentially meant ‘wait until the next bus arrives.’ Chitanda must be on the next one. That’s what you were hoping for as you calmed the panicking Danbayashi-san.”

Yet 3 hours had passed, and Chitanda still hadn’t shown up. I was impressed by Yokote-san’s calm and collected outward appearance, but she was probably starting to panic on the inside.

Based on our conversation thus far, Chitanda’s possible locations were quite limited.

“Chitanda is still in Jinde, am I correct?”

This sentence was the deciding blow. Yokote-san’s gaze started to dart

around, exuding confusion and unease, but she finally drew a short breath.

“That’s correct. The Chitandas’ daughter never came here. I’ve been lying this entire time.”

A kind smile returned to her face once more as she started to speak.

“Just as you mentioned, it rained in Jinde this morning,” said Yokote-san as she continued. “I was telling the truth when I said the Chitandas’ daughter and I waited under our black and crimson umbrellas. I wasn’t lying when I said we rode the bus together, either. There was hardly anyone else in it, so we sat near each other.

“I noticed while we were waiting for the bus that she didn’t look well. After we got on the bus and I got a closer look, it was all the clearer that her face was terribly pale. I asked her what was wrong, but the poor thing repeatedly tried to assure me that she was completely fine. However, all of a sudden, as I was wishing there was something I could do for her, she pressed the button to stop the bus.”

I suppressed my impatience and remained silent. Not only might there be more information to glean, but I thought that silently listening was the least I could do for someone willing to tell me her story. Most importantly, though, I was concerned about Chitanda’s strange appearance. I had never seen her with a pale expression like the one she had described.

“I called out to the child as she was about to get off the bus—she looked like she was about to say something, but instead she bowed her head and hurried away without saying a single word. I thought about chasing after her, but I didn’t want to stick my nose where it didn’t belong, so I stayed on the bus without doing a thing.”

It looked like she had finished with her story, so I asked a question.

“Did Chitanda look sick?”

Her response was simply, “I wonder if she was...”

It was a silly question. In the event she was sick but still didn't want to give up on singing the solo, she could've simply gone to the cultural center and explained her situation to everyone—or maybe she could've returned home to focus on getting better until just before her appearance. Whatever it was, she didn't have to get off the bus like she was escaping from something.

The reason Chitanda got off the bus early—the reason behind her pale face—likely had nothing to do with her health. This was my hypothesis, so I decided to jump straight into the matter.

"At which stop did Chitanda get off? Do you have any idea where she went after that?"

Yokote-san looked at me coldly as I asked her this.

"What will you do if I tell you?"

"Search for her, of course."

"It's no use."

She sat up straight and said so resolutely.

"That child is the successor of the Chitanda estate; she understands her responsibilities. Her getting off of the bus was simply a moment of hesitation. I'm confident beyond a doubt that she will arrive in time. It would behoove you to refrain from doing anything unnecessary and to have some faith in your friend."

I nodded.

"Yeah, I'm sure she'll make it in time, too."

Yokote-san sat there with a blank expression, looking as if all of previous ferocity had been sucked out of her.

"Then why did you say you were going to search for her?"

That much was obvious from the very start.

“It’s probably hard on her, after all.”

“It’s hard on her?”

“Can’t you see it?”

I had no idea about anything when it came to the topic of succession, but one thing I was certain of was how strong Chitanda’s sense of responsibility was. If she had truly gotten off the bus and disappeared, there had to have been a serious reason behind it. I didn’t want to dismiss that reason as just being a “moment of hesitation.”

Of course, as Yokote-san had mentioned, she would almost certainly show up before her time to go on stage. But her appearance would be the end result of the conflict—a conflict within her to smother and bury her reasons for escaping with a pale face, completely bound by her sense of responsibility. To me, it sounded like she was saying that she wanted to run away, but she had to go. She *had* to go. Doesn’t that seem unbearably hard on her?

Whenever I feel pushed into a corner like that, seeing someone come to pull me out always makes me happy. In that sense, finding her was more necessary than Yokote-san could know.

Instead of saying all of that, though, I compressed it all into a single short sentence:

“I mean, that’s what friends do.”

She stared silently at me. It looked as if she was trying to judge how much of what I said she could believe, but there wasn’t any reason the both of us should be on edge.

“After all, isn’t the reason you’re waiting here because you want to greet Chitanda when she returns?”

Yokote-san looked taken aback.

“You want to meet her here, we want to go meet her in Jinde—don’t you think we have the same goal? How about it? Won’t you tell me where she

got off?"

"Who is the 'we' that wants to find her in Jinde?"

Hm? Oh, yeah.

"Ibara is worried after all. It'd probably be better if she came along, or even if met Chitanda on her own. The only thing is, she's out searching right now, so it might be difficult to contact her. There's no time, so I'm not even sure if I should try. Do you think it's a bad idea?"

"No."

For some reason, Yokote-san placed her hand over her mouth and looked somewhat happy. She then returned her hand to her lap and continued with confidence.

"I understand. You do have a point. I've also begun to feel a little restless, even though I know she'll come. I'll tell you what I know."

I nodded.

"That child got off at the South Jinde bus stop. If you were to head there from here and follow the bus route on the right hand side of the mountain ridge, you should be able to see a single storehouse with plastered walls. If she were looking for a place to hide, it would most certainly be there."

Yokote-san said she saw Chitanda off as she left the bus. The bus would've likely departed soon after that.

I had no idea how far the storehouse was from the main road, but if it was on the mountain ridge, then it was likely some distance away. She probably only had enough time to see where Chitanda started to go before the bus pulled away. Even though she only saw so little, Yokote-san seemed to have no doubts, so I continued to harbor some doubts.

"Did you see her go there?"

Yokote-san shook her head. "I did not, however I know she did even without having seen it for myself."

Her expression was soft, as if recalling a blissful moment from her past.

"It belongs to my family, but we don't use it anymore. When she was young, that child often went there to hide from others."

I thought that Yokote-san was a close neighbor, but if Chitanda used that storehouse as her hideaway, then she must have been more than just a good neighbor.

"Yokote-san, are you related to Chitanda?"

"I'm her aunt. Today, there should be some people from the Chitanda household about. You mustn't head straight for the storehouse as there may be prying eyes. First, search for the home surrounded by hedges next to the storehouse. There will be a nameplate that reads "Yokote." Once you go past the hedges, circle around to the back of the storehouse. There won't be anyone home, but if someone asks why you're there, you can tell them I asked you to retrieve something that I forgot before coming. That's all, so please hurry."

She quickly raised her hand and pointed at the metal door.

6.

Jinde was an area encircled by rows of rolling hills just to the northeast of Kamiyama City. On paper, it was included as a part of Kamiyama City in district administration matters. But in reality, the two were merely connected by narrow mountain roads, the residences of each entirely separate from each other.

Emotional distance aside, though, there wasn't that great of a distance between the two in reality—Chitanda making the commute to school every day was proof of that. Going up and down the mountain road was arduous, but you could cover the distance in less than 30 minutes if you flew along it by bike. I checked my watch and it read a couple minutes till 4:30. There was no time to waste.

Right as I stepped out of the cultural center, assuming that I would have to make the trip by bike, the bus pulled up in front of me and the door opened as if it were a chauffeur coming to pick up a celebrity. I was completely dumbfounded. Like a deer in headlights, I was unable to move for a moment. Not only would the ride certainly be faster than going by bike, I wouldn't have to take the time to find the bus stop once I got there. Still, what unbelievable luck I had for a bus that only came once every hour to show up just when I needed it most. This had to be a trap, right?

Oh, and what a trap it must be! The route direction must have been different. If I were to board this bus of fortune, I would end up trapped in a pit, being whisked away in the opposite direction, wouldn't I? How smart was I to realize that ahead of time? I took a peek at the signboard to see where this huge detour would have taken me: "Heading to Jinde."

"Ah, ok. I'm getting on."

Other than my initial moment of shock, my mind had been racing the entire time. Without realizing it, I ended up saying this aloud to the bus that looked as if it was only moments from departing. I jogged up to it and got on, sitting in a nearby seat while sighing deeply. At that moment, I heard a sound like a deflating inner tube, and the bus door closed.

“The bus will start moving.”

It began to slowly inch forward with the announcement. It was the kind of bus where you paid when you get off.

I wanted to briefly search for Ibara before going to Jinde, but the unexpected bus arrival forced a change of plans. “Don’t be late for the bus!” said some commentator I had seen on TV at some point. After settling in, I wondered if I had money on me. I was fairly certain that I had brought my wallet with me. I searched my pockets for my wallet and confirmed that I did—in fact—have a single 1,000 yen note. While I managed to narrowly avoid a future in which I’d be forced wash dishes to compensate for not having paid the bus fare, I’d have to put off buying the book I’d wanted for a little while longer. I cursed the heavens, but—well—I guess that’s life.

There were fewer than 10 people in the bus, including me. After having left the cultural center, it took us a while to finally reach the older districts. Thanks to the narrow streets, the roads couldn’t support lots of traffic, so they were doomed for congestion. I absentmindedly peered outside the windows and a flurry of familiar scenery flowed by: the confectionary shop with delicious *yomogi dango*, the bookstore with empty top shelves because its elderly owner could no longer reach them, the drycleaners who used to sell kimono fabric when I was still young, the convenience store that put the tobacco shop out of business...

The next bus stop was announced over the speakers, and someone pressed the button to get off. Two left and one got on. The next stop was flagged as well. I was about to look at my watch, but I forcefully pulled my eyes away. Regardless of how many ways there might have been to reach Chitanda, I had already chosen the bus. I’d probably just panic if I saw the time and that’d do absolutely nothing to get me there faster.

The bus finally cleared the old district. It passed through a crossroads with a gas station the size of four tanker aircrafts on one side and a hamburger joint complete with a drive-through on the other. We finally picked up speed as the bus pulled onto the bypass.

I rested my elbow on the window frame and started to think more about the case as I gazed outside.

At first, Yokote-san referred to Chitanda as “the Chitandas’ daughter.” Only after while did she start calling her “that child.” I couldn’t say anything for sure, but I thought that she made a strong effort to not call her “that child” in front of Danbayashi-san. Some might pass it off as her simply minding her manners around others, but I felt like it was expressing something more complex—something that she couldn’t talk casually about to non-relatives.

Yokote-san had called Chitanda “the Chitandas’ daughter,” “the successor to the Chitanda estate,” and then—only after everything else—she finally revealed that she was her niece. I don’t know any of the details, and I’m not sure I should, but when I thought about the Eru Chitanda that I knew—the president of Kamiyama High School’s Classics Club—being enveloped and encircled by that title, I couldn’t stop my endless waves of nausea. I couldn’t even determine what was causing them.

Chitanda had gotten off the bus.

Why did she do that? I had nothing in particular to do while I waited to reach my destination, and the same thoughts continued to circle round and round in my head.

There were several mountain roads that connected Jinde and Kamiyama, and the road that the bus took was different than the one I normally took when going by bike. At first I was alarmed, thinking that the bus was starting to go in the wrong direction, but I soon realized that this was another viable path and sunk back, deep into my seat, as I continued to wait.

The bus finally neared the mountainous area. As we passed through a series of cleared hills, the curves starting swaying sharply left and right, and with them, my body. The carsick feeling resurfaced memories of when we were on the hot springs trip that Ibara planned around this time last year. I’m not sure if it’s true or not, but I heard that some cases of carsickness are purely mental; so, as I ascended the slopes, I came up with a song called “I’m Not Afraid of No Carsickness” and let myself be cradled by its melody.

The growling sounds of the clearly laboring engine started to fade away, and the bus entered a straight stretch of road beyond the curves. We stopped at a traffic signal, something I felt I hadn’t seen in a long time, and a female

voice called out an announcement.

“Next stop is South Jinde. Next stop is South Jinde.”

I pressed the button to request the stop. Just as the bus had started to move with the green light, it began to slow down to yet another halt, the doors eventually opening. This time, the driver himself called out in a hoarse, yet strangely rhythmic voice, “We’ve arrived at Sou—th Jinde.”

I paid the fare and got off the bus, and my first action was to take a deep breath. I thought I would’ve been okay, but I guess I ended up getting a little sick after all, and the fresh air felt wonderful. It was supposed to have rained in Jinde, but I didn’t see a single trace of water on the road’s surface. I guess it was July, after all, so even if the sun had only been out for a little bit, that would’ve been enough to quickly dry small amounts of water. Although, looking at it now, the previously blue sky had become completely filled with dark clouds. There seemed to be indications of rain lurking in the air. This wasn’t good. I didn’t have an umbrella.

I scanned my surroundings and noticed that the road the bus had taken was built along an incline. The land on its right side sloped upward, and the land on the left went gently down. Below were fields that were efficiently constructed, sparing no inch of land, and they radiated a deep green fostered by the warmth of the summer. The many houses were built far apart, dotting the scene before me as if they played a supporting role. I couldn’t get a grasp on the actual distance, but some ways off I could tell that the landscape started to slope up once more. Beyond those green hills towered the Kamikakiuchi mountain range with its remnants of ancient snow.

“The storehouse...”

As I muttered this, I looked around once more. Yokote-san had told me that I would be able to see it on the right side of the road when going into Jinde. That meant it was on the hill’s incline.

I quickly spotted it. I was anxious at first, wondering what I would do if there were multiple storehouses, but I could only see the one after scanning the area; it wasn’t too far away, either. From where I was standing, the bottom half of the storehouse was hidden from view by a wooden fence

surrounding it, so all I could confirm was that it had a triangular roof, what looked to be plastered white walls, and a set of double doors on the second story for ventilation and lighting. It didn't look like there were any buildings bordering it; the sight of the lonely storehouse on the slope presented an almost bizarre image.

I briskly made my way across the street and was about to head straight for the storehouse when I recalled what Yokote-san had told me; I should make my way there in a manner that didn't attract attention. I was a little annoyed by how she said it as well, but I couldn't ignore a request from the woman who told me where Chitanda was. Just as I was told, I began to search for the house with hedges.

A few dozen meters away from the storehouse, I noticed a home that seemed to fit the bill. It was built on a level foundation and had a tile roof; through a gap in the hedges, I could see a gatepost next to a large tree. It couldn't compare to Chitanda's estate, but it was still an impressive sight.

"I have to go there, huh?"

Although I had permission to enter, I still felt nervous about the whole ordeal. Maybe it was all a set-up orchestrated by Yokote-san, and the second I entered, I'd be apprehended on breaking and entering charges. I really didn't think that would be the case, though.

I checked my watch: it was 4:50. I guess the bus ride took about 20 minutes, then. I suppose what Yokote-san said leaving at 1:00 and arriving at 1:30 was just an estimate. The pamphlet said that the next bus for the cultural center was scheduled for a 5:10 arrival.

"This should work out then."

There were 20 minutes until the next bus came, so all I had to do was pull Chitanda out of the storehouse. If she wasn't there, well, I did everything I could have. Ibara probably wouldn't blame me, either.

I felt something cold hit my cheek. I touched my face, only to realize it was wet. Black spots began to litter the street. It had started to rain.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

It’s all too common for these evening showers to escalate into heavy downpours. I had really tried my hardest today, but it looks like the heavens weren’t going to grant me even a moment of relief. I let out a long exhale and sprinted over to the house with hedges.

7.

I went around her garden and stood in front of the storehouse.

I couldn't say that the rain was as violent as an evening downpour. At most, it was a light shower; but even then, all of the surrounding scenery had been made hazy. The eaves of the storehouse roof didn't extend out very far. I wouldn't say that it was great cover, but I managed to stay dry underneath since it wasn't windy. Thanks to the wooden fence, even though I must have looked like a lost high school student as I stood there, I didn't have to worry about being spotted. I was thankful for it, but at the same time, it the design could have attracted would-be robbers. I suppose she did say that it wasn't being used anymore; they probably weren't too worried about it.

The storehouse door was thick and plastered over. I initially thought it was fireproof as well, but in reality it was made from wood. Rivets—perhaps the size of a baby's fist—were hammered into the door forming a line from top to bottom making it look extremely sturdy. There was a hole that indicated you could padlock the door, but the most important part, the lock, was missing. I guess I didn't need a key to enter. I started muttering to myself while running my finger along the rivets.

"Well then, I wonder what I should do."

First of all, I had to confirm that Chitanda was actually here. I figured I could just knock and raised my hand accordingly.

At that moment, I felt like I heard a sweet sound mixed among the falling rain. I brought my ear to the door.

Ah... Ah... Ah...

I wondered what it was, but I figured it out quickly: vocal practice. In order to make it in time to perform on stage with the choir, she was warming up her throat here. As I realized it, I subconsciously tapped my fingers against the door.

The sounds from inside the storehouse promptly stopped. To someone inside, my tapping probably sounded like something from a horror film. I

called out to put Chitanda at ease.

“Chitanda, are you there?”

I pressed my ear to the door again yet heard nothing. I spoke once more, this time keeping my ear in the same spot.

“Are you there?”

A trembling voice whispered out. “...Oreki-san?”

There she was. Chitanda being here was entirely Yokote-san’s prediction, so I had given a lot of thought to the possibility that she was wrong, but it looked like everything worked out.

I could hear Chitanda’s voice. Although the door looked thick, it must have been quite thin; her voice felt unexpectedly close.

“Why are you here?”

Did she want to know my reason for coming, or how I knew where to go? I had no idea, so I responded with both.

“Ibara was searching for you, so I came to help. Thanks to Yokote-san’s advice I ended up here.”

“I see...”

After a slight pause, she continued with a voice sapped of its strength.

“I’m sorry.”

There was no reason for her to apologize to me, so I pretended I didn’t hear a thing.

“It’s hard to hear you. Can I open the door?”
Her response sounded as if it came from terribly far away.

“...Yes.”

“I won’t if you don’t want me to. I’m sorry.”

Yokote-san said that this was something of a secret hideaway for Chitanda. Given the situation, she would probably forgive me if I barged in without asking, but I still felt awkward about the whole thing. The rain wasn’t all that heavy, and I didn’t really mind talking through the door like this. But as I considered this, Chitanda suddenly replied, her voice panicked and flustered.

“No, it’s nothing like that! It’s just... I’m just a mess right now.”

A small silence ensued, and then Chitanda started to speak in a voice that sounded like she was mocking herself.

“You must be sick of me, Oreki-san. Even though I have responsibilities, I ran away like this. I’m sure I’ve caused so much trouble for everyone. I’m just... the absolute worst.”

Sure, I had thought it was strange, but never once had I gotten sick of her.

“Well you didn’t make it for the 2:00 meeting time, but I’m sure you were planning on getting there before 6:00. I mean, you were doing vocal practice just now after all.”

She immediately fired a question.

“You were listening?!”

“Well, only at the end.”

“...”

“Rather than listening, it was more like I just ended up hearing it.”

For a little while, only the sound of the falling rain reached my ears. It became difficult to stand facing the door beneath the narrow eaves, so I leaned my back against it. I cleared my throat and softly spoke once more.

“So, how about it? Do you think you can go?”

She responded in a timid voice.

“You’re not going to just tell me to go?”

Chitanda couldn’t see it, but my shoulders relaxed.

“If you can’t go, I won’t force you. Danbayashi-san was getting all worked up about finding a replacement. I’m sure there’s a singer or two who could take your place.”

“I couldn’t do something like that.”

I had never heard her sound as frail as she did in that moment.

A small snail had climbed the wooden fence in front of me; when did it get there, I wondered. As I absentmindedly watched it slowly move, I started to speak.

“But you can’t sing, can you?”

For a little while, there was no reply. Finally, I heard a voice that seemed to be cautiously searching for something.

“Oreki-san, do you know anything?”

“No, not really. I’m sorry, I said something that sounded like I did. I don’t know anything.”

A voice—one with a little more pep—responded.

“Of course not, there must be something wrong with me.”

The blades of wild grass at my feet were enveloped by the light shower; they stooped over, ever so slightly, under the water’s weight. The snail on the fence looked as if it was trying to climb, but it hadn’t made any progress whatsoever.

“I don’t know everything, but I feel like I might understand a little.”

Why had Chitanda gotten off the bus?

What kind of expression was on Chitanda's face, I wondered. I heard her voice respond, perhaps sounding somewhat like a child who was pestering me to tell them a story.

"Please tell me."

What would happen if I did tell her? If I was truly right about the feelings she held inside of her, would I be able to give her at least a little salvation? I had no guarantee I was even right in the first place. This was absurd. It was better to simply stay quiet.

I couldn't hear anything from beyond the door. She must have been waiting with bated breath.

I looked at my watch; there was still a little time before the bus came.

I feel like there was a folk story that fit this situation. What was my role in it? The wise man? The strong one? Perhaps I was the dancer who opened the door with her absurd dance. Fine, I guess. If the star of the show wants it, I had to tell her everything. Even if it was wrong and disappointing, I had to say it.

"Let's see. Was it perhaps—"

I took a single breath and looked up, through the ceaseless rain, into the dark sky.

"—that you were told you didn't have to succeed your family's business?"

I heard nothing but the rain. All of my senses were overwhelmed with the soft white noise, *shhh*.

"A little while back, Ibara brought up a strange story. It was about a cup of coffee that was too sweet. You were spacing out that day—certainly not your usual self. Initially, I just thought that everyone had those kinds of days, but then, as I left, I noticed the book you were reading; that image hasn't left my mind. It was a career guide. What kind of college should you go to after high school, what kind of job should you pursue, what will you eventually do with your life—it was that kind of book."

Although I should've been safe from the rain, my feet were a little wet. There was no chill from it, though. It was a lukewarm summer rain.

"We're in our second year of high school. Maybe it's only natural for us to be reading those kinds of books… but I thought it was a little strange. Ibara and Satoshi might be thinking about where they want to go in life, but you're different. At our first shrine visit of the year in January and at the living doll festival in April, I saw you act as the decided successor of the Chitanda household. You had chosen your path in life far sooner than the rest of us—at least that was supposed to have been the case. So why did I see you staring at a career guide?"

At the time, I had carelessly imagined she was just reading about a different career path that she wouldn't pursue. With the events of today, though, I had started to consider an entirely different possibility.

"Then came today's choir festival. I heard from Ibara that you'd gone missing. I knew you must have had a reason for running away. It was only after I read the lyrics that you were supposed to sing that I got this idea."

I read the lyrics in the pamphlet at the cultural center, but I didn't know which part was Chitanda's solo until I managed to ask Danbayashi-san.

"Satoshi mentioned something to me: in his works, Sandou Ejima often paised the common values of his day without holding back and, as a result, they became too preachy—he was never truly considered top class."

Ah, I beseech thee. I, too, strive to live in the unrestricted skies.

"In your part, you sang directly about the unparalleled admiration of freedom."

It was thanks to Satoshi that I was able to connect the strange feeling I had reading the lyrics with the disappearance of Chitanda. When playing shogi with his relatives, he told me that, while he was fine with throwing a game, it was the act of saying "I lose" that didn't sit well with him.

"I have a certain memory of something similar. I had gone to a relative's wedding a long time ago, and I ended up having to sing a hymn. I should've been fine with singing it because the whole thing was completely surface-

deep—honoring Jesus and hailing Maria—but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. To praise that in which I don't believe—isn't that just wronging the people who earnestly worship Christ?"

Lies place a heavy burden on the heart.

"If the lyrics were about something else, it'd be a different story. But, as you are now, don't you find yourself unable to sing a song praising freedom?"

I wondered if Chitanda was still there beyond the riveted door. She didn't speak, and I couldn't hear a single sound come through. I simply continued to talk, as if giving a monologue.

"Up until a little while ago, your future—forgive me for saying this—wasn't what I would call 'free.' I'm sure you had some input, but the one thing that wouldn't change was the fact that you'd succeed the Chitanda household in the end. If that were still the case, then I don't see why you'd have any trouble singing. But not only does it seem like your practices went normally, you also didn't decline being given the part. That means your circumstances must've changed since then."

It probably happened the day before Ibara told us the story of the overly sweet coffee.

"If you became unable to sing it in these past couple days... wasn't it because you became free yourself?"

I could hear neither a confirmation nor denial.

"You are someone who was able to do what she wanted while being told that she'd someday inherit the family business. You had thoroughly internalized that as an unchangeable truth. With that in mind, what would happen if you were suddenly told that wasn't the case? What would happen if you were suddenly told by your parents or someone else that you didn't have to worry about being the successor and that you should live your own life?"

Yokote-san mentioned that that girl was the successor of the Chitanda estate and that she would definitely come because she understood her

responsibilities; but what would happen if that Chitanda no longer fit in that role?

“You would probably have no idea what to do.”

I am someone whose shoulders bore no grand role and whose vocal dedication to an energy-saving lifestyle delivered to him idle days. With that in mind, I shouldn’t have been able to honestly understand any of what Chitanda was thinking. I shouldn’t have been able to understand anything at all—and yet, I still came up with this answer. It was all kinds of ridiculous.

“In front of so many people, could you sing a song in which you yearn for freedom? ‘Of course you’ve been entrusted with an important solo, so by all accounts you should follow through. You’ll just end up putting your fellow choir members into a tough situation. You should put aside your situation and sing, as this is also part of your role. Don’t make this all about you—’ I guess all of those sound like pretty rational arguments. I could see someone saying those things.”

In reality, it’s pretty likely someone would tell her these things. Ibara wouldn’t. Satoshi definitely wouldn’t. But, even still, someone would.

“But I—even if my deduction were correct, I wouldn’t blame you.”
After all, I had no right to.

Although the rainy season had long since passed, the soft, silent shower showed no signs of weakening or fiercening. The snail on the fence had disappeared. Had he, slowly but surely, made his way to the top? Had he fallen to the grass below? I hadn’t seen.

From beyond the closed door came a terribly soft voice.

“Oreki-san.”

“I’m listening.”

“Even though I’m told I can now live freely... Even though I’m told I can choose what I want to do with my life... Even though I’m told that the Chitanda household will be fine somehow, so I don’t have to worry...”

Her voice, changing as if descending into self-mockery, muttered one last thing.

“Even though I’m told I now have wings, what am I supposed to do?”

And with that, the storehouse became silent.

As I thought of the burden that Chitanda has carried thus far, and of the burden she was told she no longer had to carry, I suddenly felt like I wanted to hit something with everything I had. I felt like I wanted to smash it—to injure my own hand and draw blood.

I looked at my watch: 5:06. In less than four minutes, the bus bound for the cultural center would arrive.

I had said everything I needed say and done everything I needed to do. The rest, no matter how much it pained me, was for Chitanda to sort out.

Becoming neither any fiercer nor any gentler, the rain continued to fall. The sound of singing couldn’t be heard from within the storehouse.

The End

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ "Kazuru Ihara" is a reference to the famous Edo-era poet/novelist, Saikaku Ihara (1642-1693), who shares her surname despite it being pronounced differently. (One of my favorite poets!)
2. ↑ "Run, Melos!" is an extremely well-known short story by the similarly famous Osamu Dazai (1909-1948). Read the translation here before continuing: http://www.geocities.co.jp/HeartLand-Gaien/7211/kudos16/melos1.html
3. ↑ Matsuo Basho (1644 - 1694) is considered the father of haiku. This passage is the opening line from his "Narrow Road to the Deep North," an extremely influential collection of stories and poems that chronicle his famous journey through Japan.
4. ↑ A god of war.
5. ↑ A verse by the most famous Japanese haiku poet, Matsuo Basho (1644-1694).
6. ↑ Gennai Hiraga (1728-1780) is a famous Japanese inventor, among other things. Oreki here is referring to how his electrostatic generator (erekiteru) sounds like "Eru's here" (eru kiteru).
7. ↑ A Buddhist prayer, meaning something like "amen." Juumonji's shrine is Shinto, however, not Buddhist.
8. ↑ Shinto god of harvest and commerce.
9. ↑ Rentarou Taki (1879-1903) is considered one of Japan's most famous composers, and Houtarou is referring here to his popular song, "Moon Over the Ruined Castle."